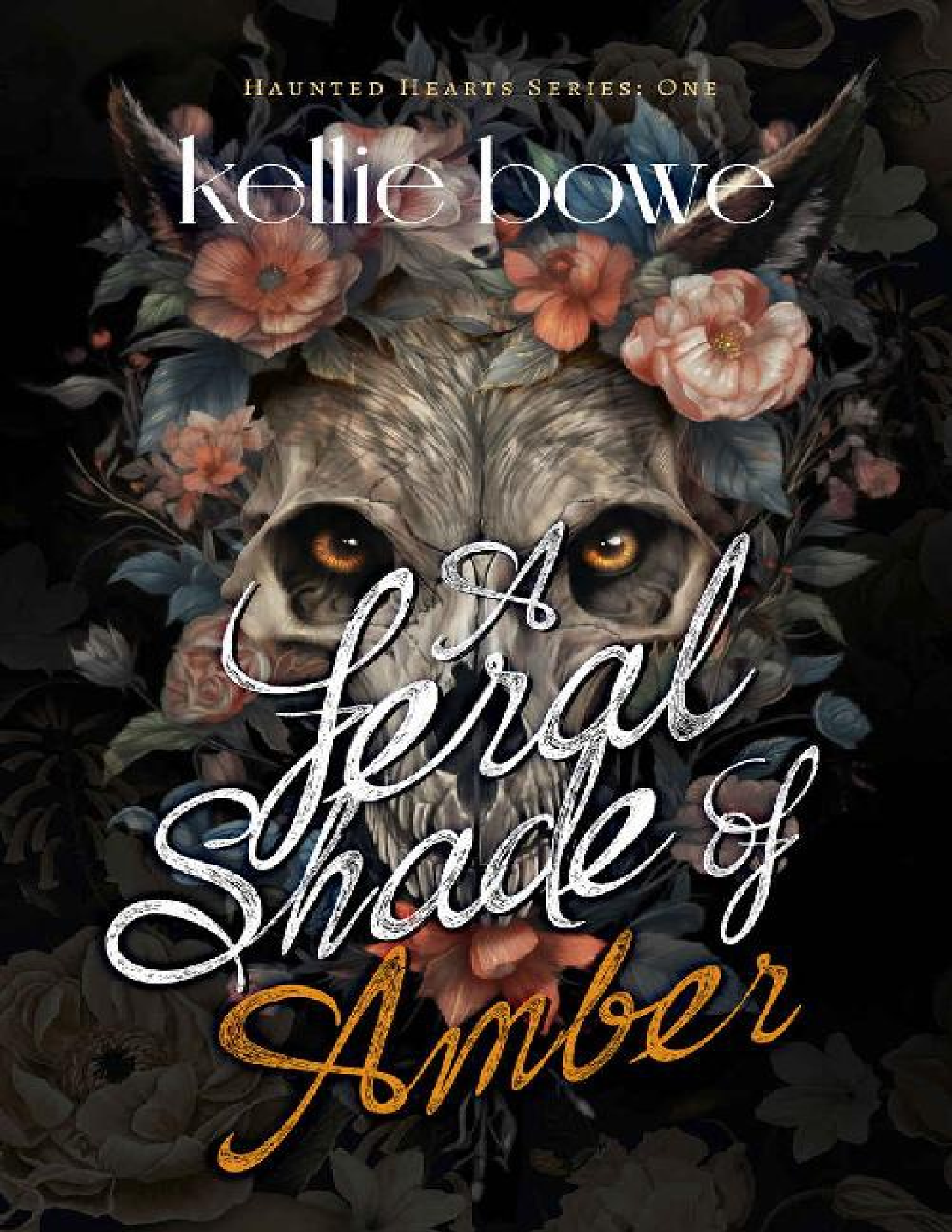


HAUNTED HEARTS SERIES: ONE

kellie bowe



A
Feral
Shade of
Amber

A Feral Shade of Amber

Haunted Hearts Series: Book One

Kellie Bowe

Scary Good Press, LLC

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To my parents, who inspired a lifetime of reading and imagination

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chapter 1

ARTIST UNKNOWN

Lisa, my housemate, bestie, and pre-ordained escape plan, was MIA: last seen skipping to her fiancé's car for a supposed beer run. Maybe, I thought, downing my third glass of wine, maybe I didn't need Lisa's "accidental" interruption. Maggie was an understanding woman. She'd forgive me for kicking her sensitive soul of a son to the curb. What did I stand to lose?

She was only a front row participant in the hot yoga class Lisa and I taught at the YMCA.

All she did was my taxes.

And held the fate of my summer arts program in her manicured nails.

And could sink those two inch claws into the ear of the Director of Conservation and Collections Management to ensure my brush never touched a significant painting again.

Of course, tonight's meltdown could have been avoided had I merely torn the check and stormed out of Maggie's office in disgust. One week later, cozied up in the privacy of my living room, her son's hand creeping along my thigh, was a little late to develop a backbone.

Nevertheless, I'd politely discouraged Keith's interest: picked my braid into a frizz, chewed crusts with the dignity of a starving hound; hell, I'd even slipped into the kitchen to crunch a garlic clove. But neither this nor incessant chatter about his mom's flexibility for downward dog had changed the course of the evening.

So, since wishing Lisa was back wouldn't make beer appear in our empty fridge, I'd uncorked a bottle of zinfandel strong enough to loosen my tongue and had unleashed the graceless declaration, "I'm going to change into something more comfortable." What I'd meant was, 'Rags used to wipe a subway car smell fresher than the smock I'm about to pull on.' Focused on

the subtle persuasions of stench, I paid no mind to the loose buttons or fabric, which had been worn to a thin sheer, so much so that it was easy to see I'd been wearing a cute bra (in case the date had progressed more along the lines of the *something something* Maggie implied).

Keith and I had been watching *The Two Towers* when at the start of the battle of Helm's Deep he'd announced he was bored.

"My favorite fantasies are the kind you can reach out and touch," he explained, curling a strand of my brown hair.

Having run out of room, time, and reasonable excuses, I scooted to the end of the couch. "What are you, a lunatic? This is the best part."

He moved onto my cushion. "It's about to be."

"Hate to break it to you, but I'm not doing anything until the horn of Helm Hammerhand sounds in the—"

Keith leaned in.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched a mouse trigger the deck's finicky motion detector, launching my cats into a chattering, scratching frenzy at the base of the glass slider. I ducked out of kissing range with a feigned, "Oh, my God! What was that?"

"Relax, Marcy." Keith's hand on my knee kept me locked beside him. "Whatever's crawling around in the dark isn't going to come inside."

"This is an old house; that's exactly what's going to happen." I lifted his hand with an emphatic sigh. "I'd better pull the have-a-heart trap out of the basement."

"Later." No matter how far I'd leaned, he was there reeling me in. "Stay in the moment. Close your eyes. Imagine yourself kissing the Prince of the Woodland Realm."

"So, listen," I'd replied, squishing the popcorn tub between myself and the guy I had come to view as the human incarnation of soggy lint (and not because I was more of an Aragorn groupie). "I'm not feeling particularly imaginative tonight."

He stroked my cheek. "What's wrong?"

Yeah, what was wrong with me? If Maggie's son left unhappy, Maggie's checkbook would snap shut in my face. No money meant no summer arts program to oversee, which was all I had to look forward to after a promptly postmarked "thank you, but no" had arrived in regard to my latest application for a conservator's apprenticeship.

I refreshed my drink with another glug of wine, then lifted the glass to

my lips to buffer the distance between my mouth and his.

“Lisa’s due back any minute,” I continued, frowning at the hall clock. Lisa had been due back forty minutes ago.

“You’ve got a big house. I’m sure we could find somewhere to hide.” He winked.

With large brown eyes, an upturned nose, and lips fuller than his mother’s serpentine smile, Keith wasn’t bad looking, but he was the tamest wealthy donor’s son I’d ever met. He worked as a CPA, spent the occasional weeknight filling in for a radio host on a classical music FM station, and attended whatever events his mother asked of him. All his stories were secondhand tales about other people’s adventurous exploits.

Overall, he seemed a good, upstanding young man who loved his mom, knew how to manage his money, and enjoyed a little roleplay.

He didn’t deserve a false date any more than he deserved the embarrassment of learning our encounter had been sponsored by his mother.

Debating how much to tell him, I took his hand. “Look, you’re a nice guy and all, but there’s—”

Bzzzt!

The doorbell. Thank God.

“Coming!” I yelled, springing off the cushion so fast the popcorn toppled into his lap and my shin smacked the corner of the ottoman. The flood of relief through my veins was so strong the pain barely registered.

“You alright?”

“Fine, Prince Charming. No need to rise any further on my behalf.” I’d already hobbled fifteen feet away when realization dawned and Keith dragged my favorite throw over the sight. “It’s probably Lisa. Our garage door’s on the fritz.”

Bzzzt!

Had Lisa had been standing outside, she would’ve added a few choice lyrics to each subsequent ring. I leaned on my tiptoes and checked the peephole.

Cobwebs blurred the frame of a man with a badge on his hip.

From the reflection in the hall mirror, I watched Keith lift the blanket, frown, and stay put. “Who’s there, Marcy?”

“Police,” I guessed, undoing the lock and bumping the porch to the top of my spring cleaning list. Hidden from interior view by etched window film, the sidelights were spattered with old webs, decayed leaves and moths

that spun like acrobats underneath the dusty porch light. Between grad school and property taxes, I'd been so busy affording the house I'd slacked on maintenance.

I glanced over my shoulder. If I had enough cash to both extend the summer program's life and prep my house for the market, another year here wouldn't sting quite so badly.

"You know you don't have to answer."

"Could be important," I insisted, re-buttoning the top of my baggy, paint-splattered smock.

I checked for my cats, then opened the door and came nose-to-chest with the man I'd been hoping Keith would be: tall, muscular, tan and dusted by the five o'clock shadow of a long day. But it was his eyes (and, being perfectly honest, the wine) that stretched my first impression of this stranger from ho-hum to memorable: such a feral shade of amber they were it gave the impression that, though groomed and impeccably dressed, he was not a man entirely domesticized. He wore a brown leather jacket, a gray vest over a dark button-down, and jeans. In a smooth motion he shifted his jacket back, all the better to observe both a holstered gun and a badge reading Lynham County, Texas.

"Uh, hi," I said most eloquently, hiding my garlic breath behind my hand.

"Evening, ma'am." A drop of the honeyed South sweetened his tone. With a ballpoint pen he tipped the brim of a weathered brown stetson. His other hand gripped a notepad. "Sheriff Caelan Harlowe, acting on behalf of the United States Marshal's Services. Sorry to interrupt your evening."

"It's fine. You're fine." I leaned my head against the flaking white door trim. "But you should know I'm a mess."

"Bad timing?"

Smiling, I eased the door to a thin crack. "Perfect."

". . . But you're a mess?" he prompted after a polite wait, waving his hat toward my attire.

"I'm a mess? Oh! Shit, no. No, no, no. I meant *miss*. Miss Marcy Davins." With all the dignity red cheeks would allow, I brushed crumbs off my braid. "Ma'am sounds so old. I'm not old. I mean, old enough . . ."

"Old enough to vote. Yes, certainly you are, Miss Davins," the sheriff said with mild amusement.

Crossing my arms, I considered my current ability to make a glib

recovery. Two seconds later, up went my hands. “Fuck it. I'm at least three glasses of wine deep tonight. Let's start over. You're a sheriff?”

“Yes, Miss Davins.”

“Well, then, may I press you for a favor, sheriff?” I lowered my voice. “Seems I'm a miss caught in a mess.”

For just a moment in the porch light his face went still and quiet. I knew in an instant he was judging me, steadied my resolve, and kept my eyes square on his. You've got nothing to hide, I told myself against the pulse of my heart in my throat. Nothing worse than garlic breath. But this man standing hat in hand before me was a creature of intelligent authority. He could find something if he wanted to.

He knew it. I knew it. We stood regarding one another with the grim curiosity of fox meeting hound, as if some budding spell of caution spread over us like spring sweeping now over the Connecticut Valley: a promise of warmth and a mindfulness of frost.

A breeze slipped between us, sending the husks of last autumn's spiders into a twitching, shivering frenzy. Then the sheriff set his hat on the rail post and smiled.

“Be my pleasure to assist you, Miss Davins.”

“Marcy!”

Mouthing, 'help' and discreetly thumbing backward, I looked from the man on my porch to the door concealing unlucky bachelor number one.

Keith's shoes squeaked across the tile. He came to stand at my back still toting my checkered throw. I could almost feel him bristle as he took stock of the sheriff. “Who's this guy?”

“Important,” I informed Keith, gesturing at the badge.

On cue, Sheriff Harlowe squared his shoulders. He studied Keith with a condescending lift to his chin, not intimidating, but watchful in the way of a hound having detected a lupine shadow trailing the flock. “Evening, Sir.”

“No one has ever knocked on my door this late except for trouble and those chasing it,” I continued. “And maybe me sometimes when I misplace my keys. This is...”

“Sheriff Caelan Harlowe,” the man supplied, hand outstretched.

“Allow me to introduce my date, Accountant Keith.” As Keith laid his sweaty palm on the sheriff's, I reached around and snagged his coat off the hook.

“And by 'date' you mean—?”

“First.” Beaming, I tugged the throw free of Keith’s loose, unsuspecting grip and replaced it with his coat. “Don’t bring this outside; there are spiders.”

Sheriff Harlowe tapped his notebook, passing on an apologetic, “Well now, if the world were kinder to its lovers, I’d leave you doves to nest, but I need to speak with Miss Davins.”

“My grandmother again?” I was lying through my teeth, but the sheriff had knocked for a reason as yet undisclosed. Gram could very well be the issue. Two years in the ground and I was still fending off various inquiries into her unfinished business.

Without missing a beat, the sheriff nodded. “Afraid so.”

An honest answer, or was he running with my lie? I couldn’t read him. Picking at the throw’s ‘dry-clean’ tag, I turned. “Keith, I’m so sorry, but you need to leave.”

Keith followed my stoic expression to its equal match in Harlowe’s. “What’s happened?”

“The particulars of this here case and Miss Davins’ involvement ain’t available for civilian discussion.” The sheriff’s eyes landed on mine. “Unless she chooses to disclose it.”

I shook my head and, solely to earn brownie points when word got back to his mother, rubbed Keith’s shoulder. “Harlowe’s presence more or less confirms what I’ve been thinking – why I acted so hesitant, earlier – Keith, you’re out of my league.”

He balked. “That’s not true.”

“We’ve got a saying back where I come from, don’t start a history with a woman of some mystery.” Harlowe removed my hand from Keith’s shoulder. “Miss Davins kicked a hornets’ nest. Take my word as a defacto beekeeper of the peace, you don’t want this swarm chasing you.”

Keith, cuing in on the mood, allowed himself to be walked down the stairs. “But we didn’t finish our movie?”

“Another time,” I lied, lingering appropriately cold-footed at the edge of my paved stone walkway.

Smiling, the sheriff clasped Keith’s shoulder. “Aw, don’t worry, Ace. Ain’t a real first date without a hiccup. Although, were I you, I wouldn’t be expecting the phone to ring and wouldn’t answer if it did. Forget Miss Davins. Spend your nights with another pretty girl.” He whispered further to his charge, whose gaping mouth made me step after them, curious. “Go on

and bid the lady a fair night.”

Keith, bless his boring, clean-shaven soul, wasn't the sort of man to stand up to a mall security guard, let alone a sheriff. I dodged his kiss and settled for an awkward peck on the forehead, after which an impassive Sheriff Harlowe and I waved as Keith backed his Porsche around the sheriff's truck.

“Great night to own a convertible,” I said, drawing in a breath of sweet night air.

“Second thoughts, Miss Davins?”

“And third and fourth, but it's the right choice.” The right choice *tonight*. Come dawn, I'd be eating a heaping side of regret alongside my scrambled eggs and toast.

As I thanked him, the sheriff climbed the steps after me, pausing to snag his hat. “That boy deserve such a sour sendoff?”

I tossed my blanket at the cat-clawed banister leading upstairs and missed. “My housemate and her fiancé ditched, but I shouldn't have agreed to a cozy movie at home in the first place. Can't exactly have my 'landlord' interrupt an unwanted kiss with a call about a flooded basement.”

Concern tightened his focus from the entryway at large to my messy hair and clothes. His attention lingered at my neck and arms. Searching for bruises, no doubt. “Was there an incident?”

“He didn't hurt me,” I said, rubbing my knee before I realized what I was doing and straightened. “But that last glass of wine may have.”

He nodded. “I've noted his plate. One call and my officers will collar him.”

“God, no. Don't do that.” If Maggie's son was dragged down to the police station, I'd have to leave the country to find work. “I'm fine, really. Chalk this up to wrong guy, wrong time, wrong motivation. I was searching for a spark in a wet newspaper.”

“Ouch.”

“Cold,” I agreed, picking a cobweb off my socks. “But that's the kind of night it is, isn't it?”

“Wouldn't be so quick to spout such woes. Not at your age, Miss Davins.” He wore a half-smile as he turned his hat over. “Might I come inside? I'm downright freezing in this fifty-degree chill.”

“By all means.”

A flash of nervous, giddy tension replaced my relief at Keith's

departure. Sheriff Harlowe would be the sexiest thing inside our home since we'd rented Magic Mike on Blu-ray DVD. But the moment the sheriff crossed the threshold his nose wrinkled. He stopped, stiffened, then sneezed. Frowning, he toed a plush mouse abandoned in the middle of the hall.

“You have—?”

“Two Maine Coons.”

The sheriff's dismayed, “Two?” knocked his attractiveness off the white picket fence of my imagination. Man of my dreams, he was not.

Disappointed, I plucked a fur off my smock as if there weren't a hundred thousand more needed in. “Would you prefer the porch?”

“With all those spiders?” He hung his hat on the coat rack, then picked up the balled throw and draped it over the banister.

“Thanks,” I said, closing the door. “Hey, you're a good bullshitter.”

“It's my job to be good, Miss Davins.” He tapped his notepad. “Now, presuming you feel safe—”

“I do, but standing in my house I realize I haven't confirmed your ID or why you're here. If this truly is in regards to my grandmother's collection, I'm sorry to report she's two years passed. What limited provenance she left behind I've already provided to Interpol. I can offer you the name of my contact there or pull the remaining dolls out of storage, but I prefer not to unlock them after dark.”

He passed me his identification. “Playing house ain't on tonight's agenda, Miss Davins.”

“I, uh, oh.” Well, crap. “What then?”

He let me sweat it out until I'd called to verify his credentials. “How well do you know your neighbor, Mr. Stephen Vilkas?”

“Stephen?” The question caught me off-guard. “We're friendly without being friends, as all good neighbors are. He in trouble?”

“Either in or causing it.”

Through the dining room window I glanced toward the twisting ivy of the buttercream, colonial-style mansion at the top of the cul-de-sac. Beginning at their backyard, a high iron fence surrounded twenty acres of overgrown apple orchard for which our street, Pippin Lane, had been named. Every light was off, including the stone lanterns beside their mailbox. The driveway, absent the usual glut of expensive cars and motorcycles, seemed an oiled snake gliding under a copse of young oaks.

I turned back to find the sheriff crouched and staring beneath my

dining room table.

A shadow slunk over the scuffed hardwood, wrapped its unkempt tail around its paws and hissed.

“Cats,” I said dismissively, helping him to his feet.

“Cats,” he said with an expression knotted between a grimace and a struggle not to sneeze. “Know your neighbor well enough to recognize?”

“Stephen’s a muscular, tattooed social media god. If the internet should break and you can’t locate any one of his dozens of dealership billboards between here and the New York state line, I suppose I could give your sketch artist an accurate description.”

“Friendly without being friends hold any more meaning than face value?”

“Nope. Grew up neighbors. We both inherited the family homes. Mine from my grandma and him from his parents.”

“Are you friendly with the rest of his family?”

I shrugged. “If I see them out, sure.”

“Would you call Stephen well-liked?”

“I’m a fan.”

His eyebrows rose. “A fan?”

“Not like that,” I said. “It’s just, he’s a good guy, did me a huger favor last summer. The Wadsworth held a pop-up exhibit in Elizabeth Park. Stephen agreed to be our featured living canvas, donated a hefty sum to the arts fund, too.”

As he wrote, the sheriff tugged the cuff of his sleeve down over a serpentine coil of ink. “You’ve got an eye for art?”

“And the degree and student loan debt to prove it.” With a wry grin, I twisted the end of my hair. “But I’ll admit, a healthy appreciation of the human form might influence my opinion some.”

Circling a word on his notepad, the sheriff murmured, “Not fond of the accountant’s form, though.”

“Low,” I told him.

“Cold night,” he shot right back.

I studied him. What a shame he disliked cats. The sheriff was a man at the peak of physical prowess, with sturdy, country muscle layered underneath the grooming sensibilities of government. Someone of his apparent strength and stature had probably ended a few fights, but there wasn’t so much as a faded scar on his face or hands. That being said, while

he may have eluded physical harm, experience and age had begun to etch their impressions on his face—and in his case, deepen its appeal, especially when he smiled.

He caught my lingering gaze and did just that. Embarrassed, I zoomed off to the kitchen with guilty red cheeks.

“Mind if I put on a pot of coffee?”

“This being your humble abode, fix yourself whatever you need so long as it ain’t illegal.” He trailed after me. “All I ask is you continue answering my questions.”

I hesitated. “Where were we?”

“What would you say is the overall neighborhood opinion of Mr. Vilkas?”

“Tolerant. Landscaping’s gorgeous: no complaints there. He snowblows the sidewalks every winter, even has his plow guy clear Mrs. Serrano’s driveway free of charge. Thing is, Stephen throws frequent parties. His home is set back from the road, so we don’t see or hear much, but he drives a lot of traffic to an otherwise quiet street. Still, complaints are few, far between, and often originate at the blue house on the corner.”

“Blue house, blue house...” He flipped several pages back. “You close with Mrs. Allen?”

“No more than I am with Stephen.”

“Good,” he began, “And I paraphrase, ‘It was only a matter of time before a tractor trailer sent that freewheelin’ son of a gun into the ditch to rot with the rest of his miserable kin.’”

I winced.

He returned to the current page. “Now, I’ve heard Mrs. Allen’s account, but I’ve been told their spat resulted from an unfortunate incident of charity late last winter. Seeing as how you ain’t close with either, I’d appreciate your reasonable perspective on the matter, presuming you know what happened.”

Everyone did. “Tammy hosts an annual holiday light show for charity, offered to pay our electric bills for the month if we’d let her string lights and post a few reindeer to turn our cul-de-sac into a winter wonderland. WFSB came this past Christmas, put our neighborhood on the six o’clock news. Stephen set up his lights that morning: every bulb was purple. He brought in ombre flocked pines and there was a huge display with garland, candy and a gingerbread donation box for Alzheimer’s. Got more attention

for his 'statement' than Tammy. She's trained her poodle to shit on his newspaper if he isn't fast enough to grab it most mornings."

"Has Stephen reciprocated her kindness?"

I shrugged. "Don't know."

Sheriff Harlowe's pen lifted from the page to point at the sudden apparition of leering yellow eyes beneath a kitchen chair. "Cat fixin' to take a swipe?"

"Or a bite." I stuck a hand underneath to shoo her. "She only tolerates her people."

"Pains me to agree with a cat," the sheriff said. He, like everyone else who'd met my cat, couldn't help staring. "Begging your pardon, but your little lady looks like she's near-filled her dance card at the grand ole graveyard waltz."

I straightened, but not before stroking the cat's tattered black ear. "Igor's been with me a little over a year and a half now. Heard her meowing in a garbage can outside the Yale Art Gallery. This teensy kitten had clawed her way through the trash and mangled corpses of her siblings and was trying to jump free despite her leg hanging by a tendon."

Grimacing, he moved in for a closer look. "Bait?" he guessed.

I nodded. "Police told me she'd been used to train fighting dogs. Scumbags dyed her and her littermates for bettors to guess the order of slaughter."

"I'm sorry to hear that." He went to pet her, but the cat's claws moved faster. Shaking his hand, he retreated. "People can be absolute monsters, Miss Davins. I don't know how many lives she's spent, but she deserves a good one after the hell she's survived."

I offered him a seat and a bandaid, but the sheriff leaned one shoulder against the kitchen entrance and stayed where he could observe my cat.

"When did you last see Mr. Vilkas?"

"Wednesday? Whatever night it was unseasonably warm. I'd got off work, was walking to the mailbox when I saw his crew rolling out."

"His crew?"

"Don't quote me on this, but I'm pretty sure he's the president of a motorcycle club his dad founded years ago. Many of the members are vets he employs. Big hearts the lot of them."

"Can you confirm he was with them?"

I opened the cabinet in search of the largest mug I owned. "Nope."

“Would you recognize his bike?”

“He’s got several.”

The sheriff frowned. “How many folks you see riding Wednesday?”

I pulled a mug big enough for a bowl of soup and shut the cabinet. “Seven, eight? Sorry. Received a letter I’d been waiting for; once I read the return address, a UFO could’ve landed on the lawn and I would’ve walked straight past.” Well, not walked so much as made a blinded run for the door with tears streaming down my face. I hadn’t meant to cry; one minute I was looking at the envelope and the next I was bawling harder than when I’d ended my first long-term relationship. Stupid emotions. Stupid letter. Stupid panic attacks that led to grand acts of idiocy such as conspiring to sleep with a benefactor’s son.

The sheriff cleared his throat. “Got any bourbon?”

“Bourbon?” Even my dark little cat rounded her ears.

He nodded. “I slam a cabinet that hard while referencing a letter and I’d be reaching for a rocks glass over a coffee mug.”

I set my mug down with a sigh. “That obvious?”

He flashed a page of notes. “Not my most challenging read this evening.”

I touched the hem of my smock. “Bear in mind this book has ended a rough week in a generously poured puddle of wine.”

“Noted, Miss Davins.” While I filled a pot with water, he moved beside the coffee maker and held up a fresh page with ‘rough week’ twice underlined. “Reckon you might recall hearing Stephen’s crew return?”

“The spring peepers have been so obnoxious this year I haven’t even heard Lisa cussing out our broken garage door when she gets home. Can you grab a filter from the cabinet right below you?”

He passed one. “Lisa is the housemate who flaked on you tonight?”

“Yeah. She rents one of the spares. She’s an athletic trainer. Actually, she worked a baseball game Wednesday and stayed over her fiancé’s apartment, so if you were thinking of questioning her, there’s not much night-of information she can testify to.”

“I’ll be at the Vilkas residence early and often this week. If you or she recalls anything you feel is important...” He paused, reaching into his pocket. “You mentioned the garage door’s broken?”

“Yeah.”

“Keep the porch light on for your rogue roomie.” The sheriff stepped

away, but not before pressing a business card into my palm. “My personal line, Miss Davins. Call if you see Mr. Vilkas or notice anything or anyone unusual.”

A familiar nervousness tingled my skin like a tight wool sweater. “Should we be concerned for our safety?”

“Mr. Vilkas is of no threat to you. Problem is, I haven’t figured out who’s the threat to him.” The sheriff headed for the coat rack. “Much as I’ve enjoyed the pleasure of your company, and as curious as I am about those aforementioned dolls, I’ve got to be getting on. Promise me you’ll lock your doors tonight.”

“I lock them every night.”

“Don’t forget the windows. Thank you for your help, Miss Davins. You and your cats have a peaceful evening now.” With a sneeze and a tip of his hat, the man walked out the door.

“See you soon,” I mumbled as the door closed. I could use a little police presence in my dreams, although tonight, with the Keith disaster fresh on my mind, I was probably safe from the usual hell.

Dreams of Maggie’s wrath would be a welcome change from the stress-induced nightmares of an oil painting I’d been restoring, *Ritual Conduit* (artist unknown). I’d incurred several heart racing night sweats thanks to that painting, and still had hours yet scheduled to the project, unless Maggie got me fired. It, like the dolls tucked away in the back of my walk-in closet, were best not remembered in the dark.

Sentimental value rather than artistic merit had brought the painting to the Wadsworth. The canvas had arrived damaged, torn, and sooty from the five alarm blaze that had destroyed its previous housing. The Wadsworth had taken the restoration on as a favor to an anonymous donor with the understanding that, in return for our services, the museum would receive a ten year loan agreement to a privately-owned Johannes Vermeer.

Ritual Conduit was not a Vermeer in style or subject. Seven tarot cards had been laid before the viewer, the fortune teller a Cheshire smile in a dark room. Heat had cracked the paint everywhere except a single card. The sixth, horned Baphomet, looked as pristine as the hour the original oil paint had hardened. “No burning the devil!” our curator had joked. I didn’t appreciate the fire’s exception, nor the way the teller’s green eyes gleamed after the initial haze had been removed. For weeks I’d dreamt of those eyes reading mine, of a delicate card’s edge traced between my breasts, of fang

tasting flesh and a ribbon of blood unravelling down.

With a shiver, I turned over the card in my hand—a phone number in black ink. No sheriff's office or county district listed.

Samson, the larger of my two cats, padded to my feet and mewed for the dinner I'd forgotten to serve him and his adopted sister. Setting the card on the hall table, I headed for the kitchen.

But not before locking the door and peeking through the shades at the sheriff's truck parked in my quiet, cozy neighborhood.

chapter 2

HANGNAIL MOON

Samson earned his name by virtue of being the largest domestic cat I'd ever known the pleasure of serving. Per the vet, he was fit as a gargantuan fiddle; basically a twenty-two pound dog with retractable claws. He enjoyed a good game of fetch and even knew several tricks.

The Maine Coon's coat was luxurious: a blotched mocha tabby set on a base of sand. His ward, however, a two-year old black female whose vet bills had sentenced me to a Ramen noodle diet for months, was a minuscule, tattered-ear imp. That she was a Maine Coon, the only type of cat Gram had kept since arriving in America, and had entered my life as Gram exited, left me feeling as though destiny had paired us together.

We called her Igor. She wasn't pretty, even after several diligent rounds of shampooing off green spray paint had revealed a coat of midnight. Her yellow eyes bulged from her skull, the left more than the right. Her fur, no matter how often brushed and how well she ate, remained short and coarse. She was always licking it upright at stiff angles around her leg and belly scars.

Igor had a penchant for stealth. She prowled at a crooked slant, never crossed an open floor, leaned into empty air if there was nothing close to twine her tail around, and acted as Samson's second shadow.

Then there was the staring – well, more a distrustful glowering— at everything and everyone, as though even her shadow might conspire to poison her. Samson put in a valiant effort to teach her the fine art of relaxation, but the younger cat was still coming around to the idea of sunny snoozes in the laundry basket. On the rare occasion she rested, it was usually across his back, with her chin on his shoulders and ears perked.

Lisa, jingling keys and reeking of popcorn, interrupted the quiet purrs

of Samson's feast. Slinking between the kitchen table and my leg, Igor left to oversee the goodnight kiss between my housemate and her fiancé.

Lisa and Wyatt made a handsome, happy couple. Lisa had played softball as an undergrad. Wyatt was the kicker for the football team. They'd met taking classes in UConn's physical therapy program. Dressed in khakis, sneakers, and university windbreakers: they looked as if they'd just stepped off the sidelines of football tryouts. Any other night, they probably would have: as graduate students, they both worked in the university's athletic department and were utterly inseparable.

Well, except when his older sister, Amelia, (a hardworking single mother and nurse) got mandated and needed someone to watch her baby.

Lisa's purse hit the floor when she saw me. She leaned in, sniffed, and recoiled. "Ugh! Oh, my God, is that the smock you were wearing when you got skunked in the garage?"

"The stench of desperation," I agreed. No wonder the sheriff hadn't joined me at the kitchen table.

"Keith's gone?"

"Yep."

Her nose wrinkled. "Then why the hell are you still wearing that?"

I shrugged. "You go nose blind after the first couple minutes. Hey, I texted like a hundred times. Why didn't you reply?"

"I never got them?" Lisa slid into the seat next to me and grabbed my hands. "Girl, I am so sorry. I checked every five, I swear, but there wasn't anything so I assumed you were fine. See for yourself." She pulled out her phone.

I waved her off. "We're cool."

"Glad to hear it." Lisa pulled her blonde hair into a ponytail. "Don't suppose you kicked Keith to the curb because a certain letter arrived and you wanna be single and ready to mingle in New York City?"

She mistook my hasty glance down for a 'no' and squeezed my shoulder.

"Hey, it's coming, okay?"

"Maybe," I said, unable to tell her it wasn't.

"I've seen your portfolio. You've earned this." She offered an encouraging smile. "Look, between your letter and my interview, our nerves are shot. Let's calm them with a drink. Run upstairs and throw on something cute."

“I’m not in the mood.”

She tugged my hand. “Aw, c’mon, Marcy. Let’s flirt pomegranate margaritas off the drunk hipsters at Bar-Geist.” At my grunt, she added, “Fine. I’ll accept brushed hair, a spritz of your strongest perfume, and tonight’s juicy details.”

Whenever Lisa and I prepped for a night on the town (her: two hours primping; me: sniff shirt, add eyeliner), she often pointed out my idea of 'effortless' needed more effort.

I loved dressing in glitz and glamour for museum galas, dates and special occasions, but spent my life restoring and often painstakingly preserving art. Lisa forgot that when I got home, I didn't want to sit in front of a mirror, pick up a brush and paint over my flaws for a trip to a hot dance floor where I'd sweat my drugstore makeup off ten minutes later. Nothing made me happier than unwinding on the couch with Samson and Igor. Beer, bra, and salty snacks optional.

Which was why, according to her, I might find love by the time I turned forty.

Might.

“Don’t you need to be up early tomorrow?” I countered.

She waved me off. “Too excited.”

I leaned back in my chair, separating waves in my now-unbraided hair. “Hate to break it to you, but the only clothes I’m changing into are pjs, Lisa, and I may not even expend that energy. Story’s dry, anyway: we hung out, didn’t click, parted ways. So—”

She anticipated my grumblings and cut me off with a lifted finger. “One drink. I just want to hang like we used to. One last night of dreaming before everything changes.”

And everything would change.

Lisa was talented, smart, and tireless. Tomorrow afternoon, she was going to nail her interview. Next week, she and Wyatt would be touring apartments in East Rutherford, New Jersey. I felt a pang of jealousy but a deeper heartache knowing my best friend was about to leave.

Their departure into a much-deserved bigger and brighter future would leave me, the bags-under-her-eyes art restoration grad student who couldn’t secure a conservator apprenticeship to save her life, with nothing to focus on but work. For now, I promoted museum content and worked on restorations at the Wadsworth, my specialty being oil paintings on hand-

stretched canvas. *Ritual Conduit* aside, I enjoyed the peace of the work. Paint and a playlist made for fine coworkers.

Of course, once word reached Maggie I might not even have those.

“I could use a drink,” I relented, pushing away from the table. “But only one, and we find a quiet corner. And I go as I am.”

“Yes, yes, and you change your shirt before I barf.” Lisa looped her arm in mine. “So what was the problem? Dude seemed nice.”

I shrugged. Keith was a nice guy. Throw a leather jacket on him and he’d still only be a nice guy. He lacked that charisma, that swarthy charm, those vibrant, amber gold eyes of a man like Caelan Harlowe. Not that I looked or dressed like a perfect ten, either. Sweatpants and sloppy buns never went out of style in the privacy of your own home. A blend of Mediterranean and German ancestry, I had dark hair, dark eyes, a fair to middling complexion and a larger nose than I’d prefer. It also didn’t help my love life that, since Gram had passed, I’d fallen into a reclusive routine of work-home-work with the intention of selling the house as soon as I landed that apprenticeship.

“Look, Lisa, Keith was fine, but that doesn’t change the fact I found him boring.”

“Big whoop. Your idea of exciting is a trip to Target.”

“We didn’t vibe.”

“No?” A devilish grin spread across her face. She waved the sheriff’s number in front of my nose. “Care to explain *this*?”

I snatched it. “A sheriff wanted to know if I’d seen Stephen Vilkas; told me to call—”

“You don’t have to lie. It’s okay to like boring.”

The front door creaked. A breeze tickled the narrow gap between my ankle socks and leggings.

“Lisa?” I began, scanning the floor for a crooked shadow.

“What?”

Panic edged into my voice. “Door’s open.”

She pushed it closed. “So?”

“Where’s Igor?”

“Creeping on Samson?”

I shook my head. “He’s eating. She was watching you from the stairs when you said goodnight to Wyatt.” Tossing the sheriff’s card on the hall table, I ran to confirm what I already knew.

No Igor.

Lisa tugged the blinds. The yellowed slats rattled up with a screech. “Could be hunting mice under the porch. It's been two minutes. How far could she go?”

“Depends on who she’s stalking.” I pulled on a sweatshirt and headed outside. Igor trusted me, but when she didn’t want to be picked up, she morphed into a tiny tigress. “Check the front. I’ll take the birdfeeder.”

“A dark cat hunting in the night,” Lisa said, stepping off the porch. “Fucking fantastic.”

The night was alive with the thrum of insects, nightbirds, and frogs.

About a quarter-mile into the woods, thousands of spring peepers crowded the narrow stretch of swampland farmers ten decades ago had used for drainage and slaughter. Even from my backyard the mating calls rose thunderous between budding trees. As I made for the distant, weedy border separating my yard from the woods, I could hardly hear myself think, let alone listen for the rare misstep of a predatory feline.

A litany of “Igor!”, tongue-clicks and clapped hands failed to summon the slinky Maine Coon. Changing tactics, I forced myself to stand still and quiet. The peepers were loud, but unable to mask the scrabble of claws on bark somewhere close.

My heart skipped.

The forest had reached a fine middle age; elms and oaks had reclaimed the farmland and grown to heights worth wandering beneath- as many did on the winding trails behind our house. Since early April, a gray fox family had begun hunting the area. Whenever someone stumbled too close to her uncoordinated cubs, the vixen was prone to banshee screams and a mad rush.

Hand braced on the smooth cold pole of the birdfeeder, I peered uncertainly into the dark.

“Igor?”

A sober Marcy would’ve grabbed a flashlight or my phone prior to dashing out of the house. Now faced with the dark or running back to find either, I was torn. If she was right in front of me and I lost her . . . I opened my mouth to yell for Lisa.

There came a voice through the darkness, words sighed in warm invite as if against a lover’s ear. All at once I became cognizant of the fact that the spring chorus had swallowed their tongues. All at once the sheriff’s

warning crept forward in my mind. All at once beneath the dangling sliver of a hangnail moon, I was certain I'd heard my name.

A light flipped on behind me, casting my shadow thin and gaunt across tree trunks. Shielding my eyes, I turned into the glow of Lisa's flashlight. She was calling me, loud and exasperated.

Stupid imagination.

"There!" Lisa's light zeroed in on movement through the shadows. Feline eyes reflected back at us four feet up a sapling.

"Got her!" I called, inching through tangled roots and wild blueberry bushes.

Igor flicked one ear toward the woods, then leaped onto my sweatshirt, hooking her claws in the gray fabric.

Lisa's cell rang. Her flashlight swung back at the house. "Wyatt's calling. You need help?"

"Nah!" I winced at the prick of claws on my collarbone. "We're good."

Nodding, Lisa jogged to the front.

Supporting Igor in one hand and massaging her cheek with the other, I let my eyes readjust to the dim night. "How many ticks did you manage to collect?" I muttered. God, I hated ticks; the mere thought made my legs itch. On impulse I scratched my ankle.

Igor's spine arched against my chest. She let out a low, raspy hiss of hellish depth and hatred.

I straightened, caught movement out of the corner of my eye and froze.

Stars twinkled over the broken timber of the swamp; the tops of drowned trees wept moonlit and everything lower was bathed in the pitch of night, but there was something moving, no, *running*, along the forest floor. A shape: quadrupedal, pale, wrong. My brain could not make it right because it was human but running on all fours with long, mud-spattered limbs and a smile that was splitting down the middle into something with more teeth.

Between me and this creature stood countless forest obstacles, but with a lowered head it plowed on in a violent rush of snapping branches.

Mesmerized, I followed its charge until Igor bit my thumb. Panic flooded my body. I ran a few feet and tripped, fell on my ass in a spray of sunflower seeds beside the birdfeeder.

Igor kicked my stomach, but I held her firm and kept quiet.

The swamp wind seeped around us, damp with the odors of stagnant water, mold and the corpses of all things winter had slain.

For several seconds my thudding heart seemed to roar over Igor's frustrated grunts as she struggled. Then I heard the breathing, a wild, wretched, hoarseness. Distance at night was often deceptive, but this sounded mere yards away.

I didn't want to move, didn't dare move, but still raised my gaze.

There beyond a veil of newborn leaves waited dark, wild eyes over blooded teeth.

The creature—not a deer, but I told myself I was drunk, spooked and had taken a bad angle—tore off toward the iron gates of the orchard. I glimpsed a second flash of ivory gaining ground behind it, then I too was sprinting—for my house—hugging Igor tight.

Howls exploded through the forest. A tremendous canine shape bounded through the strip of woods separating my house from the Vilkas property. It headed after the 'deer', but all the money in the world couldn't make me run across the dark side of the house to the front lawn. I scrambled onto the deck, past the grill, chairs, table and faded umbrella.

The slider was locked. Of course. I'd checked after the sheriff had left.

Helpless and yelling for Lisa, I pounded the glass. Her shadow moved from the kitchen to the living room. Still on the phone, she lifted a finger. The motion detector finally clicked on, bathing Igor and me in flickering incandescence.

Hissing, the cat battled to flip back toward the woods.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled. I turned.

The birdfeeder stood illuminated in the thinnest ghost of light. All around, possessing the tricksome glimmer of Stygian gold, emerged pair after pair of reflective eyes. Limbs, tails and indistinct blurs of fang darted in and out of view in angry stride, as if the dewy grass marked the edge of hallowed ground. Whatever they were they watched, pacing, growling, snapping, and then their heads turned toward the wooded depths.

A hush fell over the crickets beneath the deck. I pressed my back into the door, slapping my palm against the glass, praying Lisa would hurry.

From out of the darkness stretched a hideous, hairy hand with jaundiced nails and elongated joints. It twisted at the wrist, and one long finger beckoned me into the night.

The slider whipped open. Screaming, I fell through backward and tossed Igor deeper into the house, far enough from the door to drag it shut.

Lisa sprang back. "Jesus Christ! What the hell happened?"

I locked the slider and pulled the curtains across. Igor leaped into the windowsill by the couch. I shooed her and closed those curtains too, but not without glancing outside. With the glare of the lamp and overheads, the space beyond the birdfeeder possessed all the peaceful innocence of a black hole.

Faint, I pressed two fingers to my rapid pulse. "There's someone in the woods."

"Yeah, the scary ass vixen."

"A person." I moved window to window, re-checking locks and drawing curtains.

Incredulous, Lisa put a hand on her hip. "Really don't want to go drinking, do you?"

"No. I mean, it's not that." Tangling my fingers in Igor's fur, I took a calming breath and counted to ten. Best not to come across as a lunatic. "I saw this hand reaching out for me at the birdfeeder. And, I don't know, a pack of German shepherds?"

"Or a gnarly branch and the vixen's cubs. Or teenagers howling at the moon again."

"That was Halloween. Who'd be out on the trails tonight?"

"We weren't the first pair of dumbasses to stagger through Slaughterhouse drinking beer and smashing bottles. How far are the factory ruins if you access the trailhead from the bottom of our road, two and a half miles? Kim's kid is what, seventeen? His brain's reached the immortal age of 'scare first, consider the consequences from the comfort of your hospital bed.'"

"I'm seriously considering calling the cops." I flopped on the couch to catch my breath.

Lisa flopped beside me. "So, no drink?"

"Lisa!"

"Fine, fine. Do what you want. If you're this stressed about a couple kids wandering the woods, go ahead, Grandma Davins." She pulled off her windbreaker. "I'm setting my alarm for 4AM, but I'll be up rethinking my wardrobe if you wanna chat."

Fifteen minutes later, Lisa was upstairs and back on her phone. Samson twined about my legs as I slumped at the kitchen table waiting for the tea kettle's whistle, coffee abandoned beside the sink. Whenever I closed my eyes, the monstrous hand returned.

Knuckles coated in mud and coarse fur brushed my cheek. As the caress turned against my throat and the rough pad of its palm squeezed down, I imagined a tongue unused to speech navigating its way around both my ear and name.

Freaking painting had activated my imagination in a way I'd never experienced before. Disgusted with myself, I retrieved the sheriff's card. Dialing the black inked number, I couldn't help but think it was in no one's best interest to set foot inside in those woods tonight.

"Harlowe."

"Evening, sheriff. It's Marcy Davins." I paused, suddenly certain the hand belonged to Kim's kid in a wolf suit, but as the sheriff spoke I cut him off with a quick, "I've seen something."

"That so?" He sounded thoughtful. "Are you safe, Miss Davins?"

"I guess. I'm inside."

"Meaning you were out in the cold at the time of your sighting?"

"My cat escaped. Found her a few feet into the woods out back. Yes, it's dark. Yes, I got freaked after our conversation and yes, as someone artistically inclined my imagination's wild even when sober. But I saw something out there, either a man or a dog, being pursued by possibly a man with dogs."

A woman on the other end of the line laughed. The sheriff hushed her and asked me to go on, but the damage was done.

"It's stupid," I mumbled, rubbing my red face. "Sorry."

"Stupid doesn't make you wrong," he said softly.

"Lisa thinks it's our neighbor's son and his friends," I admitted. "She's probably right."

The sheriff questioned me, but there was little commitment in my vague responses. In the end, he thanked me for my observations and told me he and a deputy were heading out now and not to be alarmed at the presence of cruisers. He didn't need me for anything else, reminded me to check the

locks, including the oft-forgot interior garage door, then drink a glass of water and head to bed.

All things considered, he was pretty nice about my encounter. I glanced toward the quiet dark of the yard.

“Sheriff?” I asked before he could hang up.

“Miss Davins?”

“There’s an old slaughterhouse near the swamp. It’s popular on the haunted Connecticut blogs. There’s no monsters in these woods, but . . . You’re carrying protection, right?”

“Not the same kind as your date,” he replied. “I’ll be fine. You stay safe now, you hear?”

A couple minutes later, waiting for my chamomile tea to steep, I busied myself scouring Igor’s unkempt fur for ticks. She was unusually well-behaved, lounging in my lap and permitting my search over the rutted scars around her neck.

“You saw it too, didn't you, girl?”

Her tattered ear flipped back and returned forward. Her jaw quivered with an eager, soft chatter reserved for hunting spiders in the garage.

Igor wasn’t behaving; she was watching.

Her attention was directed on the window above the sink, the one overlooking the backyard, the one without curtains to close. Beneath my fingertips her spine arched and the hair stiffened.

With a hiss, Samson in his fluffiest outrage hopped on the counter.

Setting Igor loose, I steeled my nerves, shut the kitchen light to minimize glare and crept to the sink. There was a soft clatter of dishes and the plop of a cat’s foot in a cereal bowl as Samson, who regularly drank from the faucet, set his paws on the sill and pressed his pink nose to the glass as if he, too, was seeing something.

His ears tickled my chin as I leaned over him.

A long, diagonal slash split the screen.

Our doorbell rang. I envisioned one pointed nail pressing the button and a fanged grin spreading below reflective, golden eyes.

“Got it!”

I turned to see Lisa on the bottom step headed for the door. “No! Don't answer!” I ran for her, slipped on the toy mouse in the hall, and caught myself on the banister too late to stop her from reaching the lock.

“Chill, Marcy.” Lisa twirled a worn Yankees cap around her finger.

“Wyatt forgot his security blanket. God forbid he go six hours without his lucky hat.”

“It's not him! Don't—”

Her hand touched the doorknob and turned.

chapter 3

LATE AT NIGHT

Lisa opened the door to the roar of spring peepers. Blond-haired, blue-eyed Wyatt stood on the porch. I searched the shadows, but the rest of the yard was too dim and dark to determine details beyond his car's headlights. With a peck on her cheek, he took his hat and jogged to the car. Baby Coop was asleep in the backseat.

Lisa shut the door and rolled her eyes. “I get you’re spooked, Marcy, but quit acting like you're twelve.”

“Something slashed our window and the cats are acting strange.” I dragged her into the kitchen and gestured at the now pair of cats in the sink. Samson and Igor remained vigilant, bellies wet with stale milk and cheerios, tails soggy question marks. “Stranger than usual.”

Unimpressed, Lisa’s blue eyes narrowed. “Those screens are original to the house. They’ve been torn since I moved in. You’ve noticed because, one; your brain’s stuck in Friday the 13th survival mode and two; it’s warm so the cats are back to moth hunting.”

Promising to cool it on the lunatic ravings, I dried the cats and brought a cup of tea to my room, although not without instructing Lisa to leave all the outside and downstairs lights on.

Upstairs was nothing too large or extravagant— a master with an attached bath suite (mine), my grandmother’s old sewing room which I’d converted into a studio/laundry, another full bath and my old bedroom (now Lisa's).

Grandma died two years ago, but the master remained largely unchanged. I'd always wanted to make the space my own, but after the sewing supplies were moved to the basement and her yards of fabric donated, her final sanctuary I couldn't alter. Being surrounded by her memory was a comfort, and the main reason the paint cans, new curtains and many of my decorations remained stacked in a dusty corner.

She'd left the house in my name; we had no other surviving relatives. After Mom's breast cancer diagnosis, my mother, father, sister and I had moved into my grandparents' cottage in upstate New York.

Only Grandma and I left alive. Time helped, but nights like this and last Halloween's backyard invasion of lost teenagers brought the memories back with a biting intensity.

Grandma had taken me in and showed me the tattooed numbers on her arm. She gave me a sketchpad and twig charcoal and brought me into her world of artifacts and history. She was the reason I wanted to be a conservator; and tonight she was the reason I sat in bed with a pillow propped against the oak headboard, sketching by the glow of a candle that wicked summoning.

Samson pawed at the door sometime after I'd laid my head on the pillow. Igor slunk through behind him. The pair resumed their usual positions of trying to suffocate me in my sleep.

But I didn't sleep. In the dark with Samson and Igor acting as a set of purring headphones, my heart continued a hare's accelerated beat.

Teenagers. I'd seen teenagers. Why would they be in the woods at night wearing costumes in the middle of spring? 'Teenagers' was as sufficient an explanation as 'cats.'

But I had an eye for fakes.

The hand was real.

Well after midnight, Samson mrowled his displeasure at my tossing and turning. I got up, buttoned the smock over my tank, popped one of the room's two backyard-facing windows and carried over my painter's stool. The yard, dark green and pristine, lay quiet except for the distant amphibian chorus and the hum of a mosquito foiled by the screen.

The banshee scream of a fox dug itself out of the same wooded grave the moon had fallen into.

A short while after we'd moved in, Grandma and I had been on the deck using a telescope to plot constellations when we'd heard a similar wail. I remembered shrieking and jumping for the slider, remembered Grandma wiping my tears and directing my attention back onto the brass spyglass.

“Hush, child. The only monsters in this world are men,” she had whispered. “And men can die.”

But from time to time I would glimpse her sitting at the kitchen table late at night, chair oriented toward the backyard, with all the lights off and a gun an inch from her hand.

The cats were scratching the base of my door. Igor was loud, so loud I worried she'd disturb Lisa's attempt at catching an hour or two of sleep before her alarm. I thought I'd closed them in with me, but the open window must've blown the door a crack, enough to draw their attention, then closed them out on a second breeze. With my eyes barely open, I zombie-walked to the door. The hall was silent, the rooms dark except the filtered glow of the porchlight illuminating the entry.

“Alright, you guys. Come on in.”

Samson looked up at me and meowed. Curious, Igor peered around my leg, but stayed in the hall.

I frowned. “In or out. Now, please.”

They continued to sit, even turned away, until I sighed and moved to shut the door, at which point they darted inside. As Samson kneaded my pillow into submission, Igor leaped onto the nightstand. My phone clattered back against the wall. The rejection letter, and the candle I'd intended to burn

it over, hit the ground and disappeared under the bed's dust ruffle.

Igor instantly gave chase. If she caught it, she'd be rolling the damn candle around the bed frame until dawn.

I swore and lunged for the cat, catching her by the haunches as she squeezed under.

Igor protested, but I plopped her on the bed. Several pale, wriggling segments flew from her pelt and hit the bed. She batted one toward Samson, who gave the tapeworm a sniff as it whipped across the pillowcase.

Behind me, the windowsill creaked. Backed by moonlight, a man's silhouette shadowed the far wall. A low, mellow voice called, "Good evening, Marcy."

"Keith?" I whirled around toward the open window. Hairy knuckles gripped the pane as something green-eyed and rotting pulled itself through the torn screen.

The thing that both was and wasn't Keith curled its thin lips back over jagged, sharp teeth. "Hope it's not too late for a midnight snack."

A distant, feminine screech wrenched me from the nightmare.

I woke on the floor beneath the window. Robins sang; sunlight streamed through air warm with fog.

Another scream. I rushed to the landing. Below, Lisa stood beside the open front door, one sneaker lifted and its edge dripping red pearls.

Crimson shaded the porch beyond her. Blood clung dewy to the web-ridden sidelight; glossed the bottom half of our door and smothered the weathered floorboards and stairs.

"What the fuck?" With nowhere to put her foot, Lisa returned it to the

blood. As she struggled to pull her phone from her purse, her keys slipped from her shaking hand and landed with a goopy plop. “What the fuck is this?”

In the midst of the horrid spread, giving our home a white-carpet entrance, lay a ragged pelt. The animal’s head and paws had been removed. Crude fingerpaintings of anatomical hearts and arcane symbols adorned the fur with an almost ritualistic devotion given the medium. On the walkway, a tail larger than any German shepherd’s pointed north toward the Vilkas orchard.

Voice lost somewhere between nightmare and reality, I ran down, helped Lisa remove her shoes without disturbing the scene much further, and passed her the sheriff’s business card.

She shoved it back. “This is sick, Marcy. I don't know who the fuck this 'sheriff' is, but you need to give his number to the real cops.”

Sirens blaring, a pair of cruisers turned into the cul-de-sac followed by three vans and a black truck. A second from dialing 911, Lisa grabbed my arm. We edged around the blood and reached the dry side of the porch to lean over the rail.

All six vehicles stopped at the bottom of our driveway.

A series of men and women exited, toting cameras, containers, crime scene tape and parts of a tent. The truck’s door opened last.

The sheriff shook out the stetson and set it on his head. He started up our driveway, stopped, reeled a few steps backward with his gaze focused down street, and waved the driver of the second cruiser over. The officer, a pretty woman of medium complexion and dark hair, was arms-crossed and frowning before she even spotted Tammy. My neighbor stood gaping in the road, poodle in one hand, cell in the other. The teacup pup strained against her chest, ready to jump her shoulder and bolt home.

Much as I wanted to watch fire meet brimstone, the sheriff had rounded the walkway and come to a stop a few inches from the sawed-off tail.

“Miss Davins.” He tipped his hat beside bloody fragments of tail bone. “Ma’am.”

“Sheriff.” To Lisa, I whispered, “See? Real cop.”

“A real man.” Lisa elbowed me. “Oh, I would’ve ditched Keith so fast.”

If he’d heard the comment, to my relief the sheriff ignored it and flashed his badge. “You must be the housemate. I’m Sheriff Caelan Harlowe, acting on behalf of the Connecticut State Marshall’s Department.”

“You mean Sheriff ‘*Hello.*’” With a nervous laugh, Lisa leaned over the rail and stuck out her trembling hand. “I was thinking you were a creep.”

I gave her a sideways look. “Blank business cards are kinda creepy, Lisa.”

She shrugged.

Lisa had tended countless severe and horrific sports injuries; it was shocking to see her so flustered and unprofessional. Not that I could blame her. This, whatever the hell this was, was a different animal.

Literally.

While Lisa focused on the sheriff, my gaze lingered on the pelt. Death—sunken chest, cloudy eyes, constricted muscles, and, in this case, fur shorn of flesh—had a way of rendering even the largest of animals small.

Even accounting for death’s deception, the pelt suggested the mass of this creature rivaled a polar bear.

“My apologies,” the sheriff was saying. “Ain’t got much else. I offer my number to a fair few different folk in a fair few hair-rising situations. Can’t be toting the law’s business card into certain circles of hell, but Miss Davins you did verify my badge. I’m sorry for any alarm I’ve caused, however, I assure you both I am quite professional and my team more so. Behind me, you’ll observe the finest forensics team in the state setting up shop on your lawn.”

“Have you caught the sicko?” Lisa asked.

He shook his head. “Our search yielded some underage drinking at the former cattle factory Miss Davins named, but no one I’d deem sinister. Judging from the blood, and mind you I am nowhere near as talented an estimator as Gianna there holding the biohazard bag, the perp committed this act of violence less than two hours ago, well after my deputy and I had exited the woods.”

“You got here fast,” I pointed out.

“You ain’t the lone soul on this street with my number.” The sheriff’s attention turned from the pelt to me. “Seems that rough week of yours continues, Miss Davins.”

Instantly I remembered I was wearing a dirty smock, had charcoal smeared down my forearms and probably half my face, not to mention the lack of pants and bra. “Feeling equal parts lucky and cursed,” I agreed, holding my hem with both hands, wary of the slightest breeze.

He nodded. “I should add I’m thankful you called and glad you’re safe. We may not have caught the party responsible, but you’ve supplied us with valuable leads.”

“Glad to help.” I gestured at my porch. “Seems karma’s bitten me on Keith’s behalf.”

The sheriff regarded the headless pelt. “Might could be the case, I’m afraid.”

From his tone I sensed a somber confirmation of my worst fear: somewhere beneath the chirping robins and pollen-speckled nests of the spring forest, down where moss consumed stone and insects scuttled at all hours, a mud-encrusted claw was tapping away the minutes to night fall. I shivered.

The man offered his coat.

Before I could inform him the throw was still draped over the banister not ten feet behind, Lisa cut between us.

“Sorry, but do you need me? I’ve gotta haul ass to pick up my fiancé

and make our train. I didn't see or hear anything. I stepped in it. Keep everything. I've got a spare key fob I can use for today."

I gaped at her. "Lisa!"

"I'll have my nightmares on the train, Marcy." Her pleading blue eyes focused on the sheriff. "I have an interview this afternoon with the Giants. The Giants! Please, my future is on the line here. We've already rescheduled once."

The sheriff was quiet a moment, then thumbed toward a distant investigator: the cross young woman escorting Tammy to her property. "Please allow Lieutenant Mishra-Anderson ten minutes of questioning and make yourself available later should we ask."

"Oh, yes, sir. Thank you, sir!" Lisa exclaimed, careful to hold a somber tone. "Our garage door opener's broken. We've been parking outside. I'll grab my stuff and come around the back in five."

"Afraid I must insist you exit through the front. We haven't secured the area. I'll help you over the rail."

"Whatever you say." Careful not to ruin her socks, Lisa edged around the blood and back inside. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

As she disappeared down the hall, the sheriff's bright eyes met mine. He folded his coat on the rail and gave it an indicative 'for you' pat. "If I thought she knew something worthwhile or believed her to be in any sort of danger, I'd hold her."

"Are you implying *neither* one or *only* one of us is at risk?"

"I'm saying she's free to go. You, however, I'm interested in."

He excused himself to walk the scene, but help the man did once Lisa emerged, taking her bag as she hopped the rail. When the sheriff turned to answer a question from an officer, she pointed at his hand and mouthed, "No ring!"

His attention swung back right as my tongue stuck out. A dark eyebrow lifted. “This is a crime scene, Miss Davins.”

Red-faced, I apologized and gestured at my door. “Join me inside, sheriff? An open door is an irresistible temptation for cats, one of which is responsible for last night’s phone call.”

He obliged. No sooner had he removed his hat and crossed the threshold, said cats leered at him from beneath the junk drawer, having been caught red-pawed (or nearly; I’d pushed them inside before their sensitive toes could nope the fuck out of sticky cold blood and wreak havoc on everything expensive and stainable laying around, aka the couch and clean laundry pile).

Samson hissed. Igor shadowed his displeasure in a lower, raspy intonation.

The sheriff’s nose wrinkled.

“Not a cat person?” I observed, rubbing off flakes of dried mascara. When approaching the hall mirror, I avoided the temptation to look.

“Not a pet person,” he corrected. “These are your Maniacs?”

“Samson and Igor.”

“Only two?”

“Three kids are cute; three cats is the beginning of madness.”

The man sneezed. He strode away from the hissing felines and turned his hat over in his hands, removing a long strand of tawny fur with a look of displeasure. “Miss Davins,” he began, struggling to shake the fur from his hand, “contrary to whatever thoughts have railroaded your housemate's one-track mind, my next request is strictly business. I’d like to address you away from the residence. Could your cats stand to be locked in a room for an hour or so?”

I set my hand on my hip. “They’re cats, sheriff. Close the door and they’ll make it their life’s goal to reach the other side. What’s so wrong with my living room, anyway?”

He frowned. “Thing is, I’m allergic and my people will be barging in shortly to ask us both various questions concerning the tragedy on your front porch. However noble and well-intentioned those distractions may be, for ease of conversation I’m fixin’ to ask you for coffee, if you’d humor me.”

“And Samson and Igor?” They wouldn’t appreciate the intrusion.

“As to your cats, while I do believe theirs and your intestines would be decorating the banisters had the perp I’m after come knocking, we need to clear your home. Reckon your hellions won’t take kindly to strangers, and you’ll be with me, unable to wrangle them off my spring chicken of a deputy.” He offered the kind of small, hopeful smile that was difficult to turn down. “So, we house them in a room of your choosing that I’ve personally cleared. What do you say, Miss Davins?”

“Can I clean up?”

He gestured to a checkered lump at the base of the stairs. The throw. I must’ve knocked it in my rush downstairs this morning. “Yourself or the house?”

“Sunday’s vacuum day,” I explained primly, as if there wasn’t three weeks’ worth of cat fur and cobwebs glittering in the sunlit entry. “And the hall plant you’ll notice languishing in the corner they uprooted sometime between my falling asleep over a charcoal sketchpad and Lisa screaming.”

“Explains your resemblance to an extra on a coalmine set. How long’ll you be?”

“Thirty minutes.”

He checked the time on a dinged brass pocket watch. “Make it twenty, sole witness. I’ll wait.” With another sneeze, he headed for the kitchen.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I grabbed his forearm, taut, muscled, firm . . . And let that go before I got myself in trouble.

“The table.” He observed me with what felt a more genuine interest than last night’s assessment and maybe a touch of surprise. I’d surprised myself, too, because he had to prompt me with, “Go on.”

“Right,” I said, straightening. “I don’t care if you’re the president. You’re a stranger in my home not two hours after a psycho artfully arranged someone or something’s murdered pelt on my porch. I’m not gonna shower in a bathroom where the door doesn’t lock while your ilk is wandering. Wait outside. Please.”

“Yes’m,” he said with a no-regrets grin and headed for the door.

I called after him, “Yes, *Miss!*”

But when his hand found the doorknob and my feet the stairs, we both turned.

“Shouldn’t you check upstairs, make sure you aren’t leaving me in danger?”

“I’ll put on the dog and pony show if I must, but as I said, Miss Davins.” He moved his hand in a small circle. “Intestines around and around the banisters.”

Twenty minutes later, clad in black skinny jeans and a silk blouse reserved for exhibit openings, I joined the sheriff on the porch. He helped me over the rail while his peers photographed the scene.

“Strictly business,” he reminded me with an eye to my heels.

“My day’s twenty-four hours long,” I replied, shaking out my towel-dried locks. “You’re eating up one hour, maybe two. This particular business has me freaked, but I’ve still got bills to pay, errands to run, pet-friendly hotels to research before dark and cat food to buy. Think they’re monsters now? Try missing dinner by five minutes.”

Grinning, he hopped the rail. “Promise I won’t keep you a minute longer than necessary.”

Together we walked to the passenger’s side door of his truck, at least, we’d started together. At some point between the dismembered tail and my

driveway, I'd fallen behind to gawk at the surreal parade of crime scene investigators and yellow tape. The first monster I'd seen last night, *human*—I corrected myself before the panic set in—had been running ahead of the rest. And now a blood-soaked pelt adorned my porch.

Had I witnessed the moments leading up to a monster's murder?

A whistle broke my concentration.

I glanced up.

The sheriff stood waiting beside his truck, head tilted, foot tapping. When we made eye contact, he opened the door with an exaggerated flourish. "Giddy on up, Miss Davins."

"Neigh, neigh," I replied, hurrying past the mailbox to join him.

He smiled.

Once I'd climbed into the passenger seat, he moved to close my door.

Before he could, I raised my hand. "Can I ask you something?" I glanced at the curb, then back at him. "It's a bit inappropriate. Disrespectful, even."

He looked curious. "Shoot."

I watched his expression carefully for any changes, as Gram had taught me. "Are you really a sheriff?"

"Born and bred." Smooth, so smooth, like he'd been asked and answered a thousand times before.

He moved the door an inch, almost as if he was debating closing it in my face. The motion pulled back the sleeve of his shirt enough to afford me another glimpse of coiled ink. He noticed my gaze and removed his hand. "That's a mighty strange question, coming after the arrival of my team and from a woman keen to verify credentials. Be like me running your license after we talked last night and then asking, are you really Marcy Davins?"

I moved closer with the wary, standoffish smile of a fox sniffed out

by a hound. “Who else would I be?”

“Well then.” His smile brightened. “Shall we?”

chapter 4

THE DOORBELL

The sheriff thumbed to the backseat. “So I don’t know where there’s coffee ‘round these parts, but I’ve got a couple cans of something claiming to be cold brew behind your seat.”

“Left at the end of the road; there’s a Dunkin’ Donuts five minutes down.”

A black Mercedes pulled into the cul-de-sac and parked beside the cruisers. Putting the truck in reverse, the sheriff sighed. “I’ll be honest with you, Miss Davins, you’ve kicked worse than a hornet’s nest.”

I did my best to keep my tone subdued, but at his comments felt the pressure of gnarled claws, a crushing inevitability, weighing on my throat. “I’ll be honest, too, Sheriff Harlowe. After the night I’ve had, hot coffee—hold the bourbon—is the pickup I need.”

“It’d be a waste, Miss Davins.”

“Why’s that?”

“Once you hear my half of our conversation, you won’t take so much as a sip.”

“Says you.” I glanced behind the seat. “Quite rude, you know, asking a girl out only to offer her slop from your truck floor.”

“An abysmal date,” he agreed, starting the engine. “Good thing this is strictly business.”

“Positive relationships are critical to success in business, too.”

“Right you are, Miss Davins.” He smiled and lifted a hand in the direction of the Mercedes, where a portly man in a black suit and aviators had exited the vehicle and appeared to be hurrying toward us. When the man realized the sheriff wasn’t stopping, he spat and kicked the head off a tulip growing beside my mailbox.

“Yikes,” I said.

“I’ll replace your plant.” The sheriff fiddled with his mirror. “Look, if you’re starved, we can stop.”

“We don’t need to stop at all. Dunkin’ has this option called a drive-thru, where you pull up to this little box and a voice asks what you want.”

“Very funny, Miss Davins.”

We took the long way ‘round the cul-de-sac, past the Vilkas household, the lone home in this picket-fenced neighborhood to fly a coiled serpent, 'Don't Tread on Me' flag over the garage. Motorcycles and cars crammed the driveway. A silver van parked beside the mailbox.

The driver jumped out in the flirty swirl of a yellow sun dress. Stephen’s sister, I remembered, unable to recall her name. She was beautiful, shapely but not too heavy, with dark hair and rich mahogany skin laced with lighter patches—a result of vitiligo, I think it was called. The lighter spots dappled her neck and trailed into her face up into the corner of her right eye.

Stephen’s sister was more social recluse than butterfly. While I knew the siblings shared the property, I hadn’t so much as waved to her since January, when she’d been stringing blue balloons on the light posts for a relative’s baby shower as Lisa and I happened to be walking past.

She unbuckled a toddler from the backseat, but as we drove past, held a hand to his squirming chest and turned. Through the sheriff’s tinted windows she can’t have seen much, but her eyes tracked our progress.

Putting her in the rear view, I turned against the stiff leather seat in time to watch a medical examiner pull on gloves beside the ghastly arrow of a tail. The pelt belonged to an animal and yet my mind leaped to the sagging, flayed skin of St. Bartholomew in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Would the spring breeze blow dandelion tufts of fur from the pelt and leave behind a man's bruised shell? Stomach churning, I rolled the window and leaned into sunshine, unsure if I was going to puke or cry.

After a few minutes, a hand brushed my shoulder, drawing my attention back inside. "You alright, Miss Davins?"

"Does his family know?" I croaked.

"Know what?"

"That the blood on my porch isn't the kind activists throw on paintings, at least, not ones I've cleaned."

The sheriff's grip tightened on the wheel. "Seeing as their property abuts yours, I reckon they do or will soon."

"That was a lot blood."

"Mr. Vilkas was a lot of man." The colorful Dunkin' sign loomed before us. The sheriff turned in with waning cheer. "Suppose you'll be wanting a breakfast sandwich, too?"

At my stuttered reply, he ordered two medium coffees and a pair of egg and cheese croissants. We hit the road. He drove with his knees while unwrapping his sandwich. Mine cooled on my lap.

"Why my porch?"

"Tell me what you know and I'll tell you why they've come," he said between bites.

We reviewed everything I'd witnessed up to this morning, except my nightmare. I considered telling him; maybe I'd heard something and that

noise had actively influenced my dreams, but I couldn't remember any specific sound or much of the dream apart from a primitive hunger rising through Keith's rotted throat. Besides, Keith's face may have been new, but he was one of several green-eyed, man-shaped monsters to spoil my dreams in the past few weeks.

We drove along neighborhoods, back roads and onto the highway, until, with the flip of a switch, the sheriff threw on his hazards. The truck rolled to a halt on a grassy stretch of highway shoulder.

“What are we—”

“Are you ready for my side, Miss Davins?” The air from speeding cars and open fields shook the vehicle as his amber eyes met mine.

My bones felt dense with leaden dread. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and told myself this was a conversation. I could handle a conversation. “Ready.”

“Your neighbor was acting president of the Talon Pack Motorcycle Club. Are you aware, however, that club members refer to Mr. Vilkas as their ‘alpha’ instead?”

“Yeah, the pack moniker and subsequent titles is their whole theme. So what?”

“They wear wolves on their jackets, Miss Davins,” the sheriff prompted in a friendly voice. But what I heard was the calculating patience of a creature with large, luminous eyes and big, sharp claws tucked under blankets waiting for a girl in a red hood to open the bedroom door. “Why might that be?”

I hesitated. In the back of my mind, the door creaked upon the anticipant dark.

“Marcy?”

“Um.” I struggled through the words. “Someone was being clever?”

“Certainly so. Why else?”

I fiddled with the sandwich wrapper, embarrassed and nervous. There were no monsters in those woods. Only men. No monsters. Men. Grandma told me right. But what came out of my mouth was, “Those weren’t men in the woods last night.”

“Yes!” the sheriff exclaimed in soft encouragement. “Go on.”

On this sunny, spring morning reality hit like a plunge into the cold darkness of an arctic shipwreck. I asked for the sheriff’s jacket, stopped short of slipping my goosebump-studded arms through and instead wore it over my shoulders for heavy, warm security. “I’ve gone mad.”

“Seeing a monster doesn’t make you crazy.” His hand fell on my shoulder. “How could you be? You’ve only got two cats.”

My laugh, insignificant and small as I felt, was still a laugh.

With a long sip of coffee followed by a weary smile, the sheriff continued. “Talon pack may ride motorcycles, but claws grip the handlebars, Miss Davins.”

“Stephen’s pelt is on my porch.” A fact I wished to deny. “Where’s the rest?”

“Let’s rewind. Killer or killers aside, you witnessed Mr. Vilkas mid-transformation, a feat difficult to accomplish on the run, likely why he came to be hoisted onto a rusted hook. His torso, absent extremities, was reported by a paranormal investigator who’d hiked to the slaughterhouse sometime after I’d hauled those kids’ asses back to their mamas. The rest remains unaccounted for.”

I didn’t even want to consider why that might be. “Who reported my house this morning?”

“A doctor on the way to her shift.”

Deb Fitzgerald, an OBGYN across the street. “What’d she see?”

“The current state of your porch plus what appeared to be a tall, thin figure with long hair standing in the woods between your home and the Vilkas residence.”

“A monster?” I didn’t have another word.

“She described the figure as male, dark skinned, and nude.”

“Oh.” I paused. “Is that, uh, typical of werewolves?”

“Clothing doesn’t survive shifts. Unfortunately, multiple pack members and several friends and acquaintances of Stephen’s match her description.”

“Okay.” I took a calming breath, then a second, and a third. “I mean, it’s not okay; it’s terrible. The only monsters in this world are supposed to be men.” My voice sounded hollow and distant and absent emotion. No matter my suspicions, no matter my nightmares of shadowed memories or the injuries she sometimes came home with, Gram swore up and down the only monsters in the world were men. I had wanted to believe her, it was easy to believe her, and now I was falling back into the darkness. “I want to laugh, and cry, and pinch my arm or take a sip of coffee and grow big enough to climb free of this rabbit hole I’ve tumbled into.”

“You’re doing swell.” The man passed my cup. “Helps, being who you are.”

My reflection paled in the side mirror. To stave off a nervous sweat I let his coat slide from my shoulders.

He turned on the AC. “You alright?”

“Nope.” I leaned into the vents, anything to break eye contact. “Realizing how close I came to meeting the grim reaper.”

He frowned. “He ain’t out of your woods quite yet, I’m afraid.”

“Great,” I muttered, summoning the courage to then ask, “What did you mean, who I am?”

The sheriff drummed the wheel. “Well, in my experience, when the earth crumbles underfoot, daydreamers and creative types tend to adapt quick. Figured by your profession, you’re more comfortable than most when it comes to exploring possibilities and expanding horizons. Then there’s the matter of your grandmother’s dolls.”

“Oh.” Breaking his questioning gaze, I laid his coat across the rear seat. When I turned back around, I’d gathered enough composure to maintain a steady tone. “You may be right, sheriff, but werewolves aren’t the sort of concept you can grasp in the span of one medium coffee.”

“Sometimes it ain’t the sorta concept you can grasp in one lifetime,” he said. “If you need a stronger bite to swallow the news down, I don’t mind swinging by a package store. I need to find a suitable peace offering for my boss anyway.”

“Who’s your boss?”

“The bulldog who beheaded your tulip.”

“Ouch,” I said.

“You’ve no idea, Miss Davins.”

“Normally I’d go, but my nerves are rattled enough without alcohol, thanks.” The wrapped sandwich in my lap had become a crinkled stress ball. “I need to proceed through my day demonstrating some semblance of calm.”

“Only to flip the hell out once the sun sets?”

“You get me.” Talk of bosses reminded me that I hadn’t checked my phone all morning. I dared a peek: sure enough, three new voicemails, one each from Keith, Maggie and my boss.

The sheriff glanced over. “That boy trying to call on you?”

“Yep.”

“He strikes me as the blissful sort of ignorant who’d walk past a mile of yellow tape to deliver a bundle of roses in the dead of night.”

I sighed. “Yeah, probably.”

He cleared his throat. “I understand you aren’t interested, but he’s your responsibility to keep alive, Miss Davins. If you need help shaking him, say the word.”

“You think whoever killed Stephen will be back?”

“I do.”

A left lane driver laid on their horn. I jumped as a Honda Civic swerved into the middle lane. An accident at their speeds would’ve made the morning traffic report. The murder on my doorstep should steal today’s headlines, but I doubted there’d be even a footnote.

“Werewolves and other creepy crawlies aren’t swarming the news,” I observed, returning my phone to my purse.

“Those in authority would say for good reason.”

Several cars sped past as I processed his comment. If I couldn’t rein in the thoughts whizzing by a hundred miles an hour faster than the cars, I was going to anxiously babble myself into a corner and Gram wasn’t here to bail me out. “If incidents have been kept under wraps since what I’m going to assume is the dawn of humanity, why upend my universe? I haven’t seen anything that couldn’t be explained away to the general public. Whatever proof I have is being erased as we speak, isn’t it?”

“Evidence is being collected in a murder investigation,” he said stiffly, then in a pleasant tone, added, “Would I be correct in presuming you’ve read and enjoyed Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland?”

“You would,” I said, curious. “Not my favorite, but I like it.”

“Same.”

Surprised, I glanced at him. “Really?”

He nodded.

“To be honest, and this sounds terrible, but my wings if I’ve got ‘em aren’t white, I find that hard to believe.” Gram had taught me the importance of maintaining grace under pressure, but every tactic she’d drilled into me evaporated when I saw the look on his face.

“My choice of reading or the fact that I read?”

My cheeks reddened. “I, uh, sorry. I have this general image in my head of folks who read books and paging through fiction was far and away not the type of activity I’d have pegged you enjoying in your off hours. And definitely not Lewis Carroll.” I studied his profile—lean, strong, and at the moment I spoke, sporting a dimple. “Maybe the new Teddy Roosevelt biography. I heard it’s great.”

“The glorious gift of reading is the ability to escape from normal life, Miss Davins, whether your reality involves murderous werewolves or cats that have it out for a hall plant.” Canine mischief smiled through his features. He stretched his arm over the back of my seat and leaned in. “However, if you’re hankering for a subject change, go on ahead and list the off-the-clock activities you believe a gentleman such as myself partakes in.”

“Let’s stick with Alice,” I insisted, tilting the vents toward my flushed cheeks.

The sheriff made a show of lowering the air another couple degrees. “In case you’ve forgotten, Alice awakens from the horrors of Wonderland with her head on her sister’s lap in the idyllic countryside. The difference between your rabbit hole and the one Alice tumbled down is you won’t wake up from a dream. You either burrow deeper or are dragged out by tooth and claw.”

“So I’m screwed.”

“So you’ve fallen under my protection. Until Stephen’s pelt was dumped on your doorstep, it was my job to do everything in my power to keep you uninvolved.” He lowered his voice. “As you should be doing for the accountant.”

“Now?”

“I do everything in my power to keep you alive. Would call you unfortunate before I ever call you lucky, Miss Davins, but if it provides any comfort, I am happy to report I have the lowest civilian casualty rate of current active sheriffs.”

“‘Lowest’ doesn’t mean zero,” I said.

“You can’t save everyone.”

“Can I see your badge again?”

He obliged.

I searched the surface for some symbol or hint to prove his job was anything other than ordinary. Finding nothing, not even after a quick comparison to examples on my phone and some ‘helpful’ conspiracy theory search suggestions from the sheriff, I relented.

He grinned, returning it to his hip. “Told you, Miss Davins, I’m a professional.”

“But what kind of professional? Paranormal CSI? A hunter? I’ve watched Supernatural. They traipse about pretending to be FBI or police. That’s you, isn’t it?”

He laughed, a low chuckle that vibrated a funny way in his throat. “I’m friendly with several hunters, but I’m contracted to your government,” he explained. “You’ll find my name listed in a division buried beneath bureaucratic nonsense and mundane committee names. In the US, we’re titled sheriffs for ease of trust, movement, and authority when handling situations inside and outside ordinary human belief.”

“So the title’s a cover. You’re not really a sheriff.”

“Not as you know them,” he agreed. “I am elected and perform most duties, but I oversee a few more deputies than most. I take care of my community as any other sheriff, but while my human commitment ends on county lines, my supernatural jurisdiction extends statewide.”

“‘Supernatural’ as in, there’s more than werewolves?”

He nodded. “Sheriffs maintain authority over the supernatural community at large, but Werewolf are the most prevalent species, werewolves in particular.”

“Where’s my sheriff?”

“Retired. So happened I was hunting an evil that’s slithered north and received the assignment. The title’s a bit trickier in your state since y’all abolished the office. If the assignment becomes permanent, I’d be known as a Marshal, but with any luck, I’ll be back in my hometown by the end of the year.”

“What’s wrong with Connecticut?”

“Too many sardines in the can.” He didn’t have kind things to say about our traffic and winter in general, either. I couldn’t fault him there. “And your CPA, Connecticut Packs Association, maintains practices I disagree strongly with. I’m here for the monsters, not the politicians.”

“Some would argue that’s redundant.”

He smiled. “It might could be, Miss Davins.”

“I don’t spend much time with monsters, not my genre, but I’ve never considered supernatural entities as being particularly organized. Do you have tea every Wednesday, too?”

“Organized chaos, as it were. Packs don’t give a shit about the CPA. The CPA doesn’t give a shit about packs, unless they act in a way to catch a human’s eye. We clean their mess; they register themselves and provide us

with a yearly census. Sheriffs are glorified pooper-scoopers, and someone's stunk up your neighborhood, Miss Davins."

I stared up at the ceiling. Gram's truth wasn't *the* truth, no matter how much I wished it was. The sooner I accepted that, the better. "Maybe this is all real; maybe you are—"

"I am."

"Maybe," I finished. "But why my doorstep?"

"Packs tend to stick together: live close by, attend the same school, work in the same office, and so on." Gravel from a passing dump truck pinged the windshield. He swore. "Assuming this was a rival pack or yet unidentified criminal, they may have figured Mr. Vilkas was running to you, rather than by you."

"What about his own pack, Talon?"

"Talon, may have hunted him themselves, but no matter what he did in the days leading to his death, the pack would never desecrate his pelt in such a manner as gifting it to what to them is a known human."

"His skin was a gift?"

"Intended to taunt you and perhaps mock his pack. Werewolf are generally cremated and their pelts preserved and bestowed upon next of kin. Between the manner of death and the great dishonor that is your porch, I'm leaning toward a suspect outside of Talon."

"Could his killer have used what I presume are superior scent hound abilities to determine I was a human and not pack?"

"Good question." The sheriff's look was one of approval. I felt the tiniest bit proud. "Human flesh reeks of human flesh. You don't walk into a room of roses and immediately identify which petal is hiding a pine needle. A rare few can detect a wolf underneath." He scratched his chin. "Won't deny the possibility, but more than likely his killer or killers identified you, human or otherwise, as a witness and probable friend. This was a threat."

"Or a promise," I whispered, thinking of the tremendous effort and energy someone had spent painting the tail, let alone setting the gruesome scene. "What were they trying to tell me?"

"Unsure."

A werewolf's gnarled claw scratched at the back of my mind. I shivered. "Why didn't they chase me while I was locked out on the deck?" I asked, rubbing at the rash of goosebumps on my arm.

“Cars in the driveway, early in the night, multiple inhabitants home, lights on, cruisers parked up street, Stephen headed another direction. . .” He asked me to open the glove compartment and pass the notepad and pen within. “Would you recognize the werewolves if you saw them?”

“If werewolf paws generally run hairy-knuckled, I’m not confident I could distinguish one from another.” My gaze lingered on the hand of the man beside me. My, what large hands he had— but no cuts, nicks, scrapes, dirt under the nails, nothing associated with a lurking monster underneath.

“How many sets of eyes? How many hands? The smallest detail can narrow the suspects.”

I took a swig of lukewarm coffee and contemplated the mountains of lore I had to research before nightfall. “Narrow it how?”

“There are different varieties of werewolf. Depending on generation and strain, some wolf out, others retain humanistic qualities— yes, Werewolf with enough fur to constitute a pelt get skinned; the rest don’t.”

“What causes their differences?”

“You,” he said as if it were obvious. “Werewolf are compatible with humans. The result is an entire spectrum of in-betweens from the largest wolf you’ve ever seen to a human whose eyes shine bright in photos. We stick to two classifications for registration: hands or paws.”

“Which are you?”

“The kind best kept on speed dial until this situation resolves.”

“Are Lisa and I safe?”

“Miss Davins,” he began with a thoughtful tap of the ignition. “I myself am a few pieces short of completing this puzzle. You’ll need to take precautions and make your own decisions.”

“Your professional advice?”

“Can’t be opening the department to a potential lawsuit, but in my opinion it’s safer to sleep in your territory than outside it.” A pause. “I believe your housemate is not at risk provided she remains off premises.”

“Isolation sounds the opposite of safe.”

“I’m suggesting you consider the consequences and draw your own

conclusion. Your experience with violence is far different from mine.” His hand lingered on the key. “We should be headed back. There are other activities I enjoy almost as much as reading. Wouldn’t want anyone thinking I’ve involved you in one of those.” He winked. “Are you ready?”

“One question, sheriff,” I decided. “If a werewolf bit me, would I turn?”

“If a werewolf bit you, you would die. Werewolves are not humans who learned to walk like wolves, Miss Davins.” His eyes, toned by a reserved, wild grace, zeroed in on mine. “We are wolves who learned to walk like men.”

An overcast, showery afternoon saw the werewolf’s remains removed from my porch. According to the sheriff, supernatural investigators followed time-sensitive procedures. Several of the best-paying jobs in the community involved evidence gathering and crime scene cleanup.

“This is unrelated to the crime, but you’ll need to replace a couple boards,” a tech informed me after the sheriff had released me from his custody. Well, I hadn’t been released so much as he’d been yanked aside by his boss.

They’d walked to the side of my house where the figure had been spotted, when the man in the suit started to swear.

The tech waved my concerns away. “Harlowe can handle himself. You’ve got bigger problems to worry about. Feel the spongy wood here? That’s rot. From the look of it, I’d say the siding’s spoiled, too.” He pointed to a stain above the basement windows. “Could be wood rot, could be insect damage. I’m no expert, but my wife and I went through something similar with our first home. Whether you stay here or move, you’re gonna want to get that repaired. I know this is low on your list of priorities today, but sometimes it’s the little things we can control that help.”

While there was nothing to observe on the porch beyond a few discolored patches of decay, if I had the money, I’d have replaced every plank.

The werewolf revelation I kept private, but shared the obvious with Lisa: Stephen Vilkas had been murdered and the suspects remained at large. The six o'clock news, however, made brief mention of a Connecticut social media star's disappearance tied to a publicity stunt. Lisa made the smart choice and spent the night with Wyatt. I was still hunting for a cheap, pet-friendly hotel that didn't resemble a bedbug's paradise, but it was getting to the point where, by the time I'd arrived and settled in, I'd be paying for a three hour Samson and Igor curtain climbing expedition.

I texted the sheriff to let him know I'd be staying home. He promised to keep eyes on the property all night. Hands or paws? I'd asked. To which he'd responded, "both."

Early evening dragged moonlight over the wet shingles and yellow forsythia of suburban utopia. There was neither a soul to be seen nor horror to behold. Sure, the Vilkas crowd had overflowed into the street, but no vehicles had left or arrived since late afternoon. My neighborhood felt lonely as I climbed my chemically-stripped steps with a soda and a chicken parm grinder while half-listening to an incensed Maggie's threats to torch my career if I broke our agreement.

Around nine, after true dark had fallen and the frogs returned, I had eaten, changed into comfy clothes, and was talking to Lisa with my cell cradled against my ear as I barricaded the door to my room with my dresser. Beside the bed rested my old softball bat and a chef's knife. I didn't own anything deadlier to werewolves than a tarnished Star of David necklace Grandma had passed down to me for what would have been my bat mitzvah had I kept faith.

I secured the pendant around my throat wishing I'd asked the sheriff about silver. The internet was useless. Everyone from historians and creature concept designers to fantasy authors and people claiming to be spiritual werewolves had differing opinions. Whatever I wanted to believe I could find if I scrolled far enough.

Behind me, Samson snoozed on my pillow. Igor nestled her chin into the larger cat's neck. Her eyes were alert despite her relaxed posture, but fluttered shut when she ducked the crest of her shaggy head underneath my fingertips.

"Seriously, Marcy, don't board yourself into the bedroom. Wyatt and I agreed if I called and you weren't in or headed to a hotel he'd allow the cats tonight."

“It’s late. You’re tired. Don’t add a forty minute detour. The sheriff already assured me his people are watching the house 24/7. I’ll be fine.”

“We’re just getting into White Plains. Besides, there’s no fucking way we can sleep. Might as well grab you.”

“Are you sure?” I tried not to sound relieved. “The house is cleared, locked and lights blazing. I’ll survive.”

“I made Wyatt buy a box of allergy medication on the way to Grand Central. Tell her, hun. Tell her the cats are welcome and—”

Bzzzt!

Igor’s head lifted.

“Lisa,” I said slowly, “the doorbell rang.”

“Don’t answer. Anyone important has your cell.”

Bzzzzzt.

It hadn’t gone away five minutes later. At that point, with Lisa swearing at Wyatt to ‘drive around the damn soccer mom!’, I unbarricaded myself, gripped the bat, and promised to call right back.

When the doorbell rang again, I headed to Lisa’s bedroom. Her view overlooked the neighborhood. Leaning my bat against the wall, I cracked the window.

Footsteps paced the length of the porch, back and forth, back and forth.

“Hello?” I called.

The walker stopped.

“Come off the porch and introduce yourself.”

A tall, thin man dressed in khaki ambled onto the walkway. As his smile turned toward Lisa’s window, his eyes flashed. “You’re Marcy, aren’t you? You texted Harlowe about staying home.” The man reached into his pocket. It may have been fear stuffing my ears, but I swear the peepers paused to listen to his clear, crisp voice. “I’m his deputy, Larry Cho.”

“*Larry Cho?*”

“Yeah.” He held a badge toward the window as if I could read it. “People here act as if ‘Cho Beom-Seok’ is a tongue twister.”

“Touché.” Plenty of people Americanized their names. My grandmother’s cribbage partner was a Stephanie when she’d worked at a Manhattan advertising firm and Nephele in the comfort of our living room. Nevertheless, I scowled down at him. “What do you want, Larry?”

“I have your housemate’s keys.” From his pocket he produced an

evidence bag containing a key fob and Lisa's Yankees-themed house key (she'd taken her spare to New York). "Harlowe's instructions are to hand them to you or her, preferably you."

"What happened to her lanyard?"

"Not even the miracles of science could remove the blood."

"So, destroyed." A typical precaution to prevent the more curious from obtaining lupine DNA?

"Yep. So, wanna walk on down?"

"No," I decided. "Set them on the doorstep and have a nice night."

Larry's exasperated sigh seemed extra loud on the quiet street. "Our chain of custody demands I hand them to you direct."

I glanced toward the driveway. No cruiser or vehicle beside mine. "Where'd you park?"

He pointed at the snaking ridge of cars. "Truck's been cornered by Vilkas family vehicles since eleven this morning."

I rocked on my heels, indecisive. "Is the sheriff there?"

"He's pursuing a lead." Larry picked at the evidence bag seal. "Look, my shift ends in an hour. There's no reason to involve the boss in a ten second exchange."

"No reason to open my door for a stranger nearly matching the description of a potential suspect, either."

His ensuing eye-roll carried an animalistic flare. "You can't expect me to wait outside all night."

"The sheriff said someone would. I expect you'll go home when your shift ends."

"What do you want me to do, yell at a group of mourners to move their cars so I can prove I'm the sheriff's deputy?"

"If you want to go home you'll have to yell at them anyway. Better get walking."

He frowned. "You're gonna go all mulish and bray over a set of keys?"

"The sheriff didn't tell me to expect a visitor."

The purported deputy chewed his lip. "Fine. I'll level with you, Marcy. If I hand this task to Jali, she's going to be pissed, which will result in a call to Harlowe, then he'll be pissed. I just got out of the doghouse."

"Not my problem." I paused. "What got you into it?"

"Open the door and I'll tell you."

“I’ll open my door when the keys are on the porch and you’re walking to your truck.”

He held up a finger as if an idea had struck him. “Miss Kitty’s scared of the big bad wolf, isn’t she?”

I glanced at my bat. “No.”

His grin seemed extra sharp. “Oh, yeah, that’s fear. Look at you, poor kitten, quivering high in her window, wondering what tonight will bring.”

I raised my phone where he could see it. “Larry Cho is your name?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Miss,” I corrected, dialing.

The sheriff’s mellow voice held an edge as he answered. “You alright, Miss Davins?”

“There’s a Larry Cho skulking around my porch.”

“Oh.” In the background I heard the dull clamor of a bar and what may have been the crack of pool balls colliding. “Black hair, brown eyes, disposition of a tarantula?”

“Yep.”

“He’s mine.”

Suspicion nagging my gut, I sent the sheriff a photo. Upon confirmation, I held the phone to my hip and called, “Ready or not, Larry! Don’t pull any bullshit. I’ve got your boss on the line.”

Larry threw his hands skyward. “Praise Jesus!”

But at the bottom of the staircase my arms were crawling with goosebumps despite the sheriff’s insistence he sent Larry. I peeked through the dining room blinds.

Larry stood with one foot on the outside steps. He noticed me and grinned. His voice came muffled through the glass but clear. “Knock, knock, Little Red!”

“Can you please tell him to leave?” I asked the sheriff. “Blame me.”

The sheriff sighed. “Before I call off my dog, you wanna explain what’s tickling the hair on your neck?”

“The spring peepers shut up. Happens when they’re disturbed. They stopped last night, too, just before the wolves appeared.”

“There are dozens of logical explanations before we need stretch for monsters, Miss Davins.”

“You asked. Anyway, Lisa’s staying with her fiancé and she’s using the spare key fob. This return isn’t urgent. I’d appreciate your deputy turning

tail.”

“Would you take them from me? I ain’t far out.”

“Larry says you’re busy.”

“He knows I hate being disturbed on the few hours I have off, but I would prefer your roommate’s involvement formerly ended. Be there in fifteen.” He hung up.

Larry's phone rang. He reached into his pocket.

A black shadow nailed the deputy square in his back. His head slammed against the rotted planks and in less time than it took for me to gasp his body was dragged out of view. The porch light illuminated the splat of blood where his head had hit and the wrinkled plastic containing the keys, then a hairy hand reached through the gaps in the railing to sink one nail through the baggie.

chapter 5

WELL, HELL

I had two options: discover if werewolves possessed the dexterity to turn a key in a lock, or shove the hall table across the door. Some latent curiosity wanted to watch the creature stride onto the steps key in claw, but self-preservation won out. I dragged the table against the door then sprinted upstairs for Samson and Igor.

Neither had left the bed, though Igor scrunched her lips over her teeth when I burst in and slammed my bedroom door over the whine of shuddering hinges below.

With a grunt of adrenaline-fueled effort, I pushed the dresser back across my door, all the while wishing I'd swallowed my pride and slept in a parking garage with the cats.

Sheriff Harlowe said fifteen minutes. Assuming he'd decided the unanswered phone call meant bad news, help might arrive quicker. So, I would keep calm by surviving sixty seconds at a time. I could do anything for sixty seconds, according to my workout instructors.

First, I weighed my options, my foolish, stupid options.

The bat had marginal range compared to the knife; if I was close enough to stab the werewolf, I was close enough to get my guts ripped through my belly button.

Three resounding knocks echoed up the staircase.

My heart raced a thousand miles in the span of fifteen seconds. My chest rose and fell and the room took on the lightheaded tremors of a panic attack. I scooped the cats and retreated to the master bathroom, where I sank against the tub, hugging Samson to my chest and shutting my eyes. My cat was soft, quiet, and physical; I had to ground myself in the physical: Samson's chin rubbing mine, the sweat soaking my shirt, Igor's slobbered

velvet underneath my palm. Thirty seconds to quell the panic was all I could afford. I kissed him and Igor, then opened the sink cabinet and pulled out the cleaners.

Popping a lipstick tube, I scrawled 'S+I' on the mirror, trying my best to ignore their pleading mews and thumping paws. It might not have been the most effective hiding place or smart to signal their existence, but what mattered was anyone finding my body needed to notice the cats.

The front door crashed open.

My home had been invaded.

Gram had been worried our home would be invaded at the end.

She'd lost it in her final months, calling the New York State Police to ask after a retired officer, leaving letters in the mailbox with no addresses, hiding bags of feather and bone in drawers and under pillows. She and I had spent several tense nights in the kitchen, me unable to get her to bed, her with her hand on the checkered tablecloth between a cup of cold coffee and the revolver she no longer had the strength to pull the trigger of.

A crack of broken pottery spelled the demise of my brand new areca palm.

In that moment, the bat in my hands felt as dangerous as a popsicle stick. I needed better.

...Gram had better.

Apart from her clothes, which I'd donated except for some silk scarves, I still kept many of her belongings packed in the walk-in. I flipped the closet light on, shut the door (it didn't lock and opened from the outside), then laid the knife and bat on the floor in exchange for a stepstool.

The gun was old, an antique in my grandfather's family since before World War II. Shortly after we'd moved to Connecticut, Gram had smashed a hot frying pan on my hand when she'd caught my fingers stretching toward the dark cherry case on the table. I never forgot that moment or what she'd said.

“Open this box, you'll never close it!” Her nails dug into my blistered flesh as she'd dragged me to the sink. “You want a life of pain? Answer me, child! Do you want to spend your life battling tooth and claw?”

As I grew, she promised we'd get my permit and head to the range, but when high school hit she'd offered a hardline choice: painting lessons or the dusty box in the closet.

Tonight, my knuckles stung retrieving the case. Gram had worn the

key on a silver chain around her neck, but since she'd passed, I, demonstrating the epitome of irresponsible gun ownership, had taped the key to the bottom.

The revolver was burnished silver, heavy with a carved walnut grip. I'd seen her clean, carry and take enough shots at soda cans (plus a few 'swooping hawks' over my ex-boyfriends' shoulders) to know what to do.

The werewolf padded up the staircase. The sound was pleasant, eager, the tick of a dog's nails on the way to greet its master.

No ammo in the case, but four rounds in the chamber. Apparently safety hadn't concerned Gram, either.

I turned toward a commotion outside the closet—the methodical crack and rumble of my bedroom door ripped from its post and flung downstairs. Next, came the scrabble of nails on the dresser.

My hands shook. The edges of my vision browned.

An odor of muddy decay seeped into the closet.

The floorboards groaned closer, closer.

Feet apart, I thought, fighting through woozy terror. It's not the same. You're older now.

A dark shadow moved into the seam of the closet door and sniffed.

Aim for center mass.

The werewolf dragged its nails along the paneling. I flinched but held steady.

The brass handle dipped.

The door creaked open.

Before me, view entirely unobstructed, lay my quilted bedspread, the dented pillow where the cats had been resting, and the canopy frame lit with twinkling string lights. Those lights, combined with bright overheads and my lamp, made the room's buttercream walls extra cheery.

In red digits, my alarm clock projected the time onto the ceiling. Impossible to read at my angle, but it didn't matter — far too many minutes remained.

A growl, low like static on a night spent rolling the dial on an old AM radio, rose in volume until it felt as if my bones vibrated.

Beside a jungle of scarves I waited, drenched in sweat, arms extended, thankful for the revolver's textured grip.

When sinewy knuckles touched the area rug and the werewolf's profile loomed into the backlit doorway, for a fleeting second I wished I'd cut

the lights. Its arms were covered in dense black hair that faded at the wrists to the veined gray of bloated corpses. The fur lacked the cheap polyester sheen of Halloween costumes, possessed instead a hound's smooth shortness—all the scarier to accent flexing muscles and thick shoulders. Its spinal column was curved and bristled by a ridge of hair, giving the creature a permanent hunch.

The monster crooked one gnarled finger.

I should have blown a hole through its rotted heart while it was in the process of taunting me, but the thought hadn't connected to my hand. My finger was frozen against the trigger; I was frozen, mired in this moment by a grotesque, toothy grin.

The muzzle was neither a wolf's nor a man's, but rather belonged to some scarecrow amalgamation twisted into existence from the Tree of Life's pruned, worm-infested branches.

Framed by pointed ears, its eyes were glistening pools of dim sludge, sallow and polluted. Its hairless muzzle was squared, with a wide nose and wrinkles that exaggerated its wretched, predatory hunger. Fangs jutted from its mouth, each covered in clear, viscous spit. Black lips peeled back to reveal molars meant for crushing bone.

My alarm clock rolled another minute into history. No more time to be afraid.

I pulled the trigger.

One muscled shoulder flinched. The werewolf brought its snout against the smoking hole and sniffed.

Having almost lost the gun in the recoil, I righted my position and fired again. In a flash of tar and shattered glass, the beast smashed through my bedroom window, tearing the frame out with it.

The night wind swept an eerie calm over the scene. I stood dumbfounded in the center of the light spectacular, staring at rusty blood sprayed across my quilt, hearing screams I hadn't heard in years, until the downstairs floorboards creaked.

A hoarse, familiar voice called, "Miss Davins?"

One yard over, Tammy's poodle started barking.

I crept to the hole in my wall. An ugly smear marked the spot where the werewolf had smashed into the patio table. Debris lay scattered in the direction of the birdfeeder. Burdened by wind-whipped clouds and the spidery oaks, moonlight failed to penetrate the forest depths.

The sheriff called again.

Answering, I clambered over the dresser and into the hall. Below, my bedroom door had been propped against the hole where the front door formerly resided. “Sheriff?”

The man stepped from the shadowed dining room to the lighted entryway. His eyes flashed in the transition.

Panic squeezed my lungs. He’s on my side, I reminded myself, keeping a sturdy grip on the gun.

The gleam of his eyes had distracted me from his hands, which had just undone the last button on his shirt. He paused halfway through shrugging it off and rolled it back over his shoulders with a polite smile. “Evening. You alright?”

“Yeah, but I think your deputy is dead.”

“That’s a shame.” He was so unfazed I thought perhaps he hadn’t heard me. “Anyone here needing help besides yourself?”

“The cats. Trapped ‘em in the bathroom cabinet.”

“Excellent.” His smile was not reassuring in the slightest. “Would you be so kind as to grant me permission to shift? Swear on my black, little heart, I’ll pay for the cleanup.”

“Do what you’ve gotta do. I’d rather cry over something in pieces than *be* the something in pieces.”

“Would’ve turned already but werewolves ain’t designed for domestic living.” Off came the shirt and a white tee underneath. He gestured at the revolver. “Glad I didn’t barge in with my pointy ears on.”

“One in the shoulder,” I said, wiping sweat off my forehead. “I didn’t see if the second hit. It jumped out my window and here we are.”

His head turned toward the porch as if he’d sensed the groan of a rotting step. “Where do you feel safest, Marcy?”

Goosebumps crept up my arms. I pointed to the master.

“Go on ahead. I’ll be right after you.”

Leaning against the railing, I paused. “This is going to sound perverted, but can I watch?”

He patted his abs with an immodest grin. “This view’s nice, but if you find anything past the initial strip sexy, I’d reckon you’re a deviant. One way or another, don’t much mind.”

My face reddened. “You sure?”

“Ready when you are.” He undid his belt and shortly thereafter his

jeans and boxers dropped. Toeing his attire to one side, he then scaled the stairs in easy bounds that made things I should not have been looking at bounce. Unashamed, the sheriff stood nude on the top stair while I struggled to focus.

A wretched howl broke the stillness.

I'd lost the panicked dizziness but here it came, roaring back, and my heartbeat neared explosion and I was going to faint into a naked man's arms and this was a disaster.

"Get a grip, Marcy," I murmured.

"On yourself, not me," the sheriff added with a grin that calmed me the slightest bit.

"Well, hell," I said, unable to grasp any other word except another four letter one deeply inappropriate given his current state. "Can't you bust through clothes?"

"Clothes are expensive," he replied with a hand on his hip oh so matter-of-factly, but his brow was wrinkled, his attention elsewhere. "Just the one?"

"That I've seen." I passed him the gun and started for the master. At the dresser, I clambered on top and offered him a hand.

With minimal effort, he pushed my barricade aside. "Not a bad thought, if you were fixin' to keep a toddler at bay."

"May not stop a werewolf," I agreed, nodding to my door's snapped hinges. "Stalled you a few seconds."

"Werewolf or not, me climbing pantless ain't a sight anyone need be subjected to."

I returned the dresser into place with far more effort than he'd expended. "Rest assured, your lack of attire is low on today's list of memorable moments."

"What a relief, Miss Davins," he muttered, flexing his toes, the skin of which, while human in appearance, had thinned to reveal an expanding darkness. The sheriff's ankle made a terrible cracking sound.

"Marcy," I corrected, gesturing carefully at him. "I've never had a naked man in my bedroom and not referred to him by first name. Except I'm blanking on yours."

He offered his hand. “Caelan.”

His fingers were hot as an iron and thickly boned. They flexed and released my palm as if he’d forgotten how to hold on. Two of his fingernails had peeled from the nail bed, leaving a cherry smear across my hand.

The scent of decay seeped into the room.

Caelan pushed me toward the master bath.

“Hide!” His was a roar that strained the boundaries of human vocal chords. He dropped to his knees, shoulders rolled back, and tore at the pulsing veins of his throat. Where his nails punctured flesh, blood and steam flowed together as his skin sloughed off in wet piles.

A shadow filled the doorway.

The werewolf pressed its claws on the door frame to leer in at us. Shoulder oozing, it shoved the dresser aside and entered, beady eyes focused on the sheriff, who had dropped onto his side while his bones cracked into new shapes and positions.

Glancing from the bathroom, where Samson and Igor were no doubt scared out of their minds, to the helpless sheriff, I lifted the revolver. “Hey! Hey, over here!”

Ignoring me, the invader’s drooling grin widened. The monster rose onto its hind legs, the tips of its ears bent against the low ceiling. As it drew even with Caelan, who had staggered up on four inhuman limbs to block me, one clawed hand struck the side of the sheriff’s saturnine features. With a sickening crack, the muscles and bones of a half-formed wolf snapped into human position, and the sheriff lay still and wreathed in smoke.

“You okay, Caelan?” I backed toward the ruined window. “Sheriff?”
Silence.

Head swaying with serpentine intensity, the werewolf advanced. Pus-slimed maggots dribbled from a gash across its stomach where my second bullet must have grazed. The stench of rot was nigh unbearable. With half the

room still to cross, the werewolf lunged forward on a braying howl, claws extended, jaws widening in preparation to latch around my throat.

On the exhale of a deep, steadying breath, I fired – then dropped to the floor.

With no target to disembowel, momentum flung the werewolf three-quarters of the way out the gaping hole that had once been my window. Claws raked the siding as it tipped further and further toward the wreckage of my deck. I rolled out from beneath its legs and, with its gnashing teeth and hands trapped outside, yelled in a stupid fury, “Down, boy!” and pushed. It tipped further out, but not enough. I backed up for a running start. With every ounce of strength in my body I shoved its gore-slicked mass. “I. Said. Get. Down!”

The monster crashed onto the deck with an ear-splitting yelp. My shoulder glanced off the wall at an angle that scattered stars across my eyes. I fell backward onto wet carpet.

“Hey, moron!” a rough voice hissed. The sheriff writhed on the floor in a pool of blood. He clutched at his back, where bones bulged and muscles tensed underneath a blossoming cherry stain. “You shot me.”

I glanced out the window—the deck chairs were flattened, speckled by wriggling maggots, and absent one pissed werewolf— then rushed to the man on my bedroom floor, grabbing his arm as he slipped in his own blood. I helped him into the bathroom.

“Pull it out!” he howled, clawing at his back. The right side of his shoulder had swelled to unnatural dimensions.

“Hell, no!”

“I’m not human. I’ll bleed out if you *don’t* remove it,” he snapped. Pain rimmed his eyes red. “Where the fuck—ah, pardon my language, Miss Davins—where in the blazes did you find silvered bullets on short notice?”

“My grandma,” I said, flinging open the medicine cabinet while Caelan huffed and puffed on the edge of my tub.

He paused with his fingertip sunk into the entry wound. The surrounding skin tore with disturbing, papery ease. Fur glistened underneath. “Your *grandma*?”

“She taught me a lot.” Gram may have skipped the firing range lessons, but there were a few skills she’d drilled into me, from survival techniques like starting a fire, to self-defense, staying calm under stress, lock picking and hot wiring my old car. “I’m starting to believe she was more

lucid than her doctors thought. You can't shift, can you?"

"Pry this bullet free and I will present you the bastard's head within the half hour," he promised. "I can do it in this skin but it'll take longer. . . Real sorry for my language, Miss Davins. Preacher man I am not."

"Don't worry about it. I have it on good authority that the moron homeowner who shot you is cool with whatever the fuck you want to say to or at her."

He smiled. One of his canines was longer than the other.

I surveyed my medical inventory. Disposable gloves, Band-Aids worthy of a papercut, cotton balls, q-tips, grooming scissors, tweezers. Yeah. Eyebrow tweezers were gonna remove a bullet. "There's a trauma kit in the downstairs coat closet. If we can—"

"The enemy could be waiting," he said. "Dig it out. It ain't far into the wolf flesh."

Not knowing proper procedure, I pulled on a pair of gloves. There was the knife in the bedroom closet, but I hoped not to need that. "Does silver halt the shift in both directions? 'Cause I might've lodged one in his shoulder."

"Pull. Goddamn. Bullet!" Caelan hissed.

The cabinet hissed back.

The almost-werewolf's pupils expanded. He reached down.

"No." I swatted his hand. "I'm not trained for—"

He repositioned himself in front of the sink, gripped the counter and hunched beneath the light. "Now."

I hadn't seen this much blood since the cabin. In the mirror, my reflection besides his paled. I backed away. "No, no, I can't."

Meeting my eyes, he took my shaking hand with a firm squeeze. "You can do this, Marcy. I ain't saying you have to do it well; you've just gotta do it."

"Okay," I said, rocking on my heels. "Give me a moment, alright? Ten seconds to regroup."

He nodded.

Closing my eyes, I focused on the patter of blood hitting the tile, the sheriff's uneven breath and Samson's angry cries as he struggled in vain to escape. My little cat would try to protect me, I thought, as he had so many years ago. But tonight, it was my turn.

With a washcloth I wiped Caelan's wound, braced my palm against

his back and paused. “Before we begin, you should know I have never in my life won a game of Operation.”

His laughter came in a short bark.

We were lucky the bullet hadn’t fragmented, he told me as I dug, or else he might have required medical assistance. Werewolves could tolerate trace amounts of silver; it was in their chemical composition same as any human’s, but a certain grade of the metal was known to halt their abilities of rapid cellular growth and regeneration. Without healing, there was no way to survive the destructive transformation, effectively locking a werewolf in their current state until the silver was removed.

It took some inelegant mining in the distorted mess of fur and flesh, but the bullet finally pinged onto the tile. Caelan’s body tensed into mine. The handsome face in the mirror twisted. Bones shifted and broke. Flesh re-knit over a lengthening snout. Steam poured from his open wound and clouded my view.

“Caelan?” I reached through the red. In the swirl of bloody smoke my palm pressed flat to a thickening darkness.

Fangs snapped inches from my hand. In a blind panic, I fell backwards into the tub. The shower curtain and rod toppled over me. By the time I’d kicked free, there were nothing but bloody paw prints on the floor.

chapter 6

VERITAS MORTIS

Ignoring the angry cats in the cabinet, I felt along the counter for the gun, then the ventilation fan switch.

Steam filtered through the bathroom doorway, drifted around my soft footsteps into the bedroom. At the first warm squelch, I kept my eyes focused ahead, lest I look down and lose it. Flesh squished between the toes was as unpleasant on the first step as it was on the fifteenth. Kicking off the last bit of sheriff, I eased around the bed, listened for trouble, then checked the revolver. Three bullets had taken their pound of Were-flesh. One remained.

I entered the hall. Insects swarmed the chandelier above the entry. Accompanied by their spastic shadows, I descended a staircase flecked with bloody prints and gouges, moved past the broken pottery and upended table, and headed toward my porch and the nocturnal landscape beyond the light's reach.

The night sounded calm as any other on our cul-de-sac, filled with the chorus of frogs, crickets, and the dragging whirr of skateboard wheels on uneven pavement...Shit.

I rushed to the edge of the porch.

Wearing a neon helmet, my neighbor's son rolled past the sheriff's truck (no flashing lights, I noted) and up along the parked motorcade spilling from the Vilkas drive.

"Devin!" I called, voice caught in the hoarse realm between a whisper and a shout.

The kid ghosted through streetlight after streetlight.

Cursing, I hurried off the porch, shoulders tensed for the explosion of leaves that would precede a snarling shadow. No werewolf appeared, but left along the side of the house toward the woods, I spotted a pair of legs

protruding from the weeds.

Devin took a second pass around. With a final, nervous glance at the prone deputy, I sprinted across the lawn.

“Devin! Hey, Devin!”

“Marcy! What’s up?” He kicked closer.

“There’s, there’s...” The words stalled. “You’ve gotta get inside.”

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

He didn’t move. In fact, he hadn’t seemed to notice the gun, my panicked expression or the body that may or may not have been visible from the street. His attention had landed square on my thigh.

I became aware of a sticky pull, then the memory of the chaotic fight hit me fangs-bared. The shot, the lunge, the pressure of a madly scrabbling werewolf. I examined my thigh. Four gashes split the skin wide. A fifth hadn’t fully shredded through my yoga pants.

Blood oozed over my knee.

Devin’s face blanched. He stumbled off his board.

“Go home,” I panted, semi-covering the wound with my free hand. A yelp split the air. Snarls piled onto it.

As I whirled toward my driveway Devin bolted for his. The sheriff’s truck blocked my car, but I could stomach mowing down a few emergent hostas to save my skin. I wasn’t equipped for werewolves. I would be safer leaving, as I should have already done. The sheriff would be safer, too.

The beginnings of a plan in mind, I ran through the entry. Violence echoed through the walls from somewhere in the backyard.

Stop the bleed. Find the keys. Get the cats. Go.

After a fast search through the medical kit for some steri-strips and a shoddy repair attempt on my thigh, I couldn’t find my keys hanging on the

hook near the garage, didn't see them in the pockets of my coats, and couldn't find them on the counter.

I moved into the living room; I'd brought my purse into the kitchen to organize right before Lisa had called. I was a chronic fiddler of stuff when on the phone, remembered jiggling my keys for Samson's amusement when I'd roamed around double-checking locks in the waning sunlight. Could've set them anywhere. He or Igor could've pawed them under a piece of furniture before heading to my room for their nap.

Screw it, I thought. I knew where the sheriff's keys were. I'd grab Samson and Igor, fling them into the cat carriers and get the hell away.

Turning, I caught my reflection in the living room slider—smock knotted around my leg; shirt, face and arms splattered with the sheriff's blood
...

An enormous black wolf skirted the edge of the birdfeeder.

I froze, must've spent five anxious minutes peering into the darkness beyond, when a hand latched onto the metal pole. The sheriff, naked, tarred in gore and fur, leaned against the feeder to catch his breath.

Revolver in hand, I unlocked the slider and stepped underneath the floodlights into the ruins of my patio set.

Caelan's eyes, wild, amber, but lacking a certain tapetum lucidum flare; met mine.

He limped closer. Took my brain a couple seconds to realize I was witnessing not a man stumbling forward on a horrific leg injury, but rather a wolf walking upright through the last moments of transition as tibia and fibula bowed into humanity. His toes cramped and flexed, painfully, I imagined, from the grimace darkening his blood-streaked face. On closer inspection, he was covered more in mud than blood, but there were yet raw veins of crimson glistening in the filth of his chest.

"Good?" he asked, one mere syllable difficult to produce. He swallowed, winced, then tried again with enunciation that'd taken a slow roll through gravel. "How badly are you hurt?"

"Stitch-worthy, but under control." I glanced down. "Mostly."

"You want to help or rest?"

“I have a choice?”

“Always do.”

“Tell me what you need,” I decided, checking the safety on the gun and then awkwardly juggling it between my hands because with the way the night had thus far unfolded I suspected I'd shoot a hole through my heel if I shoved it into my waistband.

His hand dropped to my wrist, a gentle request for the weapon which I surrendered with hesitation and relief. “Always know what’s behind your target before you pull the trigger.”

“No excuses, I’m sorry.”

He checked the cylinder. “Wasn’t thinking a nervous, panicky idiot would send me to an early grave tonight—and you haven’t.”

“What’s the penalty for shooting a sheriff?”

“There’s no law against it.” His expression was calm, placid, curious. “All things considered, you handled yourself well. Have you danced with a devil before, Miss Davins?”

“Only those in the shape of men.” With him watchful in a way that elevated my heart rate; I focused on the woods leading to the iron gates of the Vilkas orchard. “The werewolf, you killed it?”

“I didn’t send him to bed with a glass of warm milk.” The sheriff headed toward the side of the house. Clumped fur and swamp slime coated his back, but I couldn’t make out any visible trauma from my errant shot. “In my line of work, if you want to make sure something won’t come back to bite you in the ass, you’ve gotta make sure it can’t come back at all.”

“How do you kill something undead?”

“Sometimes I trap ‘em, but, short of complete destruction, best I can do is tear it into less harmful pieces.”

“What’d you do to this guy?”

“He was alive,” Caelan replied.

“With a belly full of maggots?”

“Infested, but alive.”

I glanced dubiously toward the deputy’s body. “We aren’t knifing Cho in the head to make sure he doesn’t zombify, are we?”

“Don’t be silly, Miss Davins. You still have one bullet.”

I blanched. “We’re not though, right?”

Ahead, sagged against a trunk as if he'd been KO'd in a boxing ring, rested the corpse of Cho Beom-Seok. Warmth had fled his skin, leaving an

alabaster mask of open brown eyes and lips twisted into a sneer. In the dark there was more to imagine than visualize, but my eyes were adjusting. Didn't take long for the tattered shadow of his throat to become recognizable flesh; bared to the night and glazed with arterial blood were glands, muscles and his mutilated trachea.

My stomach clenched. In the next instant I was one tree over vomiting.

The sheriff wiped his hands on the hem of Cho's shirt and held my hair. "Can you help carry him out of sight?" he asked when my guts couldn't force anything more. "We'll proceed through the backyard, stopping to retrieve my clothes and keys. With your permission, I'll pull onto the lawn and we can load him in the bed."

"You can't do it yourself?"

"My shoulder won't be proper for another hour," he said with raised eyebrows.

"Sorry again," I muttered.

"It's alright." Following my horrified gaze, the sheriff tipped Cho's chin over the gaping wound. "Won't judge you for taking a trot indoors."

"I'm good," I claimed, even though I wasn't. "Ready when you are."

Caelan tucked the gun into Cho's pants and supported the dead man's shoulders. Together we removed the man from the weeds and laid him flat before my stomach again went rogue.

"Do you have designated morticians?" I asked when I'd regained enough digestive fortitude to straighten.

"Morticians and morgues and graveyards."

"Oh my," I added, present but drifting further from reality at the sight of Cho's throaty grin burbling secrets to the moon.

"Werewolves are a prime example of the concept *veritas mortis*. Truth of death. Or 'truth in death.'" Caelan's nose wrinkled. "Never was a student for Latin. Give 'em a couple hours and he'll have fur sprouting out his ears. It'll take more than the pair of us to carry him then."

"So his pelt goes to next of kin?"

"Indeed."

"Ew." I shivered. "Keeping your father's or brother's or grandfather's skin? That's disgusting."

“People have been doing funny things with flesh and bone for centuries. Many consider it a respectful tradition to burn or dispose of the pelt in a natural location the wolf was known to have loved in life, but no, not everyone takes it upon themselves to skin. Cremation, burial, research donation—our requests are no different than a human’s, mostly.” With a grunt, he lifted the front half of the body. “Cho was a high potential candidate for a future sheriff’s position. Eager to learn, ambitious, but trainable. Good man, for one of my lot. His half-brother works the Montana packs.”

“So Cho wanted to follow in his brother’s paw prints?”

The sheriff nodded at the bloody impression in the brush. “Don’t much matter now. His hopes and dreams are feeding the weeds. Grab his legs there.”

Legs were heavy. I never thought about legs being heavy, but as I hoisted them they weighed quite a lot, especially against the worsening pain in my thigh. The truck wasn't far, but seemed leagues across a grass sea.

“So silver really is kryptonite to werewolves?” I asked.

The sheriff froze, head turned toward the woods. I lost my grip and had to regather Cho’s legs. Frogs peeped in fading numbers.

Caelan picked up the pace. “Being a hidden people, we don’t often correct assumptions. That being said, silver, the right silver, keeps werewolf safe.”

“How so?”

“Well, parents send their children and teenagers off to school with silver piercings from a qualified shaman like the one who crafted my and Stephen’s tattoos. Hormones, uncontrollable emotions—not a good mix.”

“You don't consider caging them in one form cruel?”

“Cruel,” he said, again glancing toward the tree line, “is watching your friend's son lowered into the ground because yours got angry about a prom date. Imagine then surrendering your daughter when the Otherworld deems her a community risk and demands her euthanized. Werewolf aren't any more used to or fond of killing than humans.”

“The Otherworld?”

“The supernatural community and its governing body.”

We trudged on underneath scattered moonlight. With blood seeping into my sock, I resorted to running my mouth to keep the pain at bay.

“Steam’s not in the movies.”

“Change on a physiological level is work. Lots of energy, lots of

heat.”

“Okay, and—”

“Look, I'm not here to educate you, Miss Davins. Your grandmother should have done that,” he snapped. “I'm here to keep your feet out of the grave that cat of yours is hissing at me from.” I must've made a face, because he cast a concerned glance at my leg. “You can sit if you need to.”

“I have more questions than pain,” I said. “My grandmother raised me *human*. Unless she left a book of secrets tucked away in a dusty corner of my attic, you're my sole resource.”

He observed me with a scrutinizing intensity, then, as he had on the porch when we'd met, relented with a smile. “My apologies, Marcy. Ask me anything.”

“I'm sorry about Cho. Were you partners long?”

“Known him all of eight months, but that don't make death easier or harder to cope with. There's folks I've known my entire life whom I wouldn't shed a tear for and folks I never met alive who haunt me to this day.”

“Literal haunting?”

Headlights stretched across the driveway into the backyard and empty woods. The sheriff dropped the body, dashed around and grabbed my arm before I stumbled over the corpse and into the light.

“Who are you expecting tonight?”

“Lisa.” I'd never called back. Where the hell had my phone gone, anyway?

By the time the engine cut off, Caelan was already halfway to the slider.

I stumbled after him. “Where the hell are you going?”

“To fetch my clothes,” he hissed.

“Says the man fresh from Countess Báthory's tub. What's clothing going to do? No, stay put. I'm grabbing the hose. I can explain away a naked man better than a bloody one.”

“And will she believe you?” he asked, hand on hip.

I scowled. “Seeing is believing. Besides, you must keep a wolf kit in your truck with a gallon of water, a clean outfit, and a couple of promiscuous excuses.”

He rolled his eyes. “My keys are in my pants pocket, which last I recall is at the bottom of your entry next to my cell, which I'll also need to

call you an ambulance.”

“Can't we tell them?”

He shook his head. “Humans don't fare well against the supernatural.”

With a glance from Cho's gaping throat to the hole in my bedroom wall, I added, “Neither do houses.”

Car doors opened and closed.

“Around back!” Caelan yelled and stepped inside. “Black bear with cubs emerging from hibernation, lured by food wafting through an open window. Mauled Cho prior to your opening the door. Got it?”

“A black bear? Who would—”

“You can't shove monsters back under the bed, Marcy. I've tried.”

“Not forever,” I murmured. “Fine. Use my shower. I'll distract them.”

He licked blood off his lip with a wolfish grin. “Thank you, Miss Davins.”

“While you're in there, I have two carrying crates by the kitchen table.”

The grin disappeared. His hands rose in protest. “Oh no. Cats hate me.”

“You remember where Samson and Igor are?”

Reluctant, he nodded. “Easy prey.”

At that I reconsidered, but he'd already closed the slider. Clutching the injury I should have been paying more attention to, I stumbled into view of Lisa's car.

chapter 7

FANGS OF LUNACY

Lisa sprinted to my side, wrapping her arms around my sweat-drenched shoulders.

“Holy shit! Marcy, are you alright? What the fuck happened?”

“Take me to your car,” I said. “We may not be safe.”

“Safe from what?”

Clinging to Lisa through a shaky grip, I glanced over my shoulder. Frog song, the rustling hop of a rabbit underneath the arborvitaes separating my yard from Tammy’s, a whiff of spring’s night blossoms ...

“Mama bear. She got in a good swipe.”

“I called 9-1-1 twenty minutes ago.” Lisa frowned at the sheriff’s truck. “Can’t believe he’s all they sent.”

“Animal control and an ambulance are on the way,” I lied. “The guy at the door claimed he was a sheriff’s deputy. I called Harlowe to confirm. We were on the phone together when I opened the door. I didn’t even realize it was a bear at first, just this huge black mass...” I trailed off, reliving darker shadows than tonight’s, and wiped a tear. “Her cubs were in the bushes. They bolted after the sheriff arrived.”

“The deputy?” Lisa scanned the porch. “Where’s he?”

“Dead.” Not what I intended to say, but with Lisa and Wyatt waiting, the words came tumbling. “Poor guy was returning your keys at the end of a long shift.”

Wyatt unzipped his hoodie and slipped it over my shoulders. Grateful, I leaned against the side of the car where I could both monitor the house and keep an eye on my friends.

Lisa gestured at the demolished front door. "Samson and Igor?"

"While she mauled the deputy, I'm ashamed to admit I fled upstairs and hid with the cats in the bathroom until the sheriff found us."

"I didn't think black bears were vicious," Wyatt said. "Aren't they supposed to be skittish?"

"I guess we surprised her and the cubs." I ran a bloody hand through my hair. "The sheriff believes she's diseased."

Lisa's attention drifted from the darkened yard to the house. "Where's your knight in shining armor?"

"Retrieving the cats."

Her eyebrows rose. "You entrusted your beloved angels to a stranger?"

"Had no choice." I loosened the smock. "Fainted after the deputy bled out. Sheriff had me stay seated. When we saw your headlights he went inside and I limped over."

"May I?" Lisa asked.

Nodding, I peeled the fabric away from the line of mangled strips and torn skin.

She gasped. "Shit! You've been talking so calm; I thought for sure it was superficial!"

"Adrenaline?" I guessed. "Shock?"

Lisa ordered me into the backseat and retreated to the trunk. I settled sideways across the cushion with my legs stuck where she could reach. She stuffed a beach towel under me. "Longest is a good six inches. I'll tighten this

up, but we need to move.”

“An ambulance is coming.”

“We’ve got you, girl.” She leaned her head over the car door. “Wyatt, tell the sheriff to meet us at Bayberry Hill ER.”

The ER was the only place I wanted Wyatt walking into. I tried to push past Lisa. “Wait! Wyatt, can you lift the garage door and grab the carriers off the shelf by the snowblower? I forgot to tell the sheriff where they were.”

Lisa laid a gloved hand on my shoulder. “For fuck’s sake, Marcy, relax.”

As Wyatt poked around in the garage for carriers I knew weren’t there, the sheriff appeared, hissing cats crated in either hand, and ordered him back to the car.

Relieved, I laid flat on the seat. Lisa opened the sunroof to give me a distraction while she worked. For the first time since sunset I felt a resounding sense of safety and security, and then Lisa applied pressure.

Propped on my elbows, I examined the blood and spreading bruises until the sweat came hard and a fly-like buzz annoyed my ears. “I’m gonna pass out.”

“Lay back.” Lisa scissored a neat square out of my yoga pants. “Remember when you slipped out of your flipflop and stubbed your toe in the Mystic Seaport parking lot?”

I laid across the seat, folded my hands on my stomach and turned my fading gaze onto sepia-toned, twinkling stars. “I remember you laughing.”

“Hey, I always check if you’re okay first. Tiny splotch of blood and you got so nauseous you had to sit in the grass to keep from passing out, but tonight, here you are, walking on this? Who are you and what’ve you done with Marcy?”

My voice echoed in my own ears. “Haven’t been this scared since I

was small,” I whispered, then fainted.

I came-to with my cheek pressed against a warm shoulder. Lisa had tucked my legs into the car. The sheriff leaned in, close enough I got a hint of cucumber melon body wash.

“Your cats could turn the devil chicken,” he murmured, turning his hand over to reveal an Igor-sized bite on the plump part of his thumb.

I leaned away, all the better to glimpse concern in his warm, human eyes. “Samson gives what you deserve; Igor, whatever she wants. They okay?”

“Spitting mad,” he said. “Your housemate gave me her address. I’ll return them there. I’ll do what I can to keep the pests out, but I’m afraid your home is uninhabitable. I can let you in tomorrow afternoon for what’s needed: cat food, clothing, bags to skip town ‘til this blows over.”

“Gram’s gun?”

He frowned.

So did I. “So that’s a ‘no’ on my only weapon capable of taking down a bear?”

“Your shot almost got me killed.” He tapped my forehead. “Your brain got the animal out of your house.”

“That pile of rocks between my ears was also responsible for keeping me home in the first place. I need the gun. For nothing else if not practice.”

“I ain’t in the habit of returning weapons, however, I will consider the particulars of this case, Miss Davins, and get you your answer promptly.” He massaged his thumb. Igor’s teeth marks were already a faded stippling of pink. “When you need to talk, give me a call.”

Secondary to the wait, the worst part about the ER was convincing myself I had escaped unscathed from the fangs of lunacy. Due to the nature of the scratch, I received the first in a series of rabies vaccination shots.

The physicians didn't know werewolf claws had scored my thigh, or that I'd spent several minutes digging a bullet out of the sheriff's shoulder. Had infectious material from Caelan's transformation seeped into my wound? The thought made me nervous, but he wouldn't have left me in human hands if there was any chance of a news story involving a wolf in a hospital gown.

So I deemed myself sore, but safe. I tried not to think about the other reason the sheriff may not have halted my hospital trip: if the first shift featured a unique timeline, such as taking a month for the body to grapple with the infection before the change occurred. I didn't want to become a werewolf. I couldn't handle becoming the very beast that had, in my nightmares, destroyed my family.

Not that I could do anything about it at this point. Lycanthropy was incurable.

That was my rosy view on life 38 stitches and a cocktail of pain killers later.

After being informed my friends were huddled in the waiting room sipping coffee because they had called in late to work to bring me home, I decided against ever involving them in this supernatural hell. Promising today was all about naps and Netflix, I convinced Lisa to leave me to recover on her couch. Wyatt dropped sixty bucks for pizza and sugar therapy, told me where to set the litter box, and then the pair of lovebirds flew the coop and I was alone in their apartment.

I'd spent the first hours alternating between scribbling questions for the sheriff and waking in a cold sweat to men with green eyes and lupine shadows stalking the hall.

Exhaustion finally blessed me with sounder sleep until early afternoon, at which point the painkillers wore off and I had to pee and it felt such a tiring walk that, when I got back, I couldn't find the energy for anything, not even flipping through talk shows. Unfortunately, I needed my

cell, wallet, laptop and car (and to locate my godforsaken keys) in addition to a few smaller items: comfy pjs, shampoo, a razor, cat food, etc.

I called a cab, then shut off the TV, taking a minute to consider my reflection in the blank screen. I opened my mouth, ran my tongue over my teeth in search of fangs—no, no, that was vampires. I wondered if it was easier to turn into a vamp than a werewolf, to endure a single death or constant change?

In the light of day, Pippin Lane was picturesque. Robins sang from high oaks and maples. Sunlight warmed the stalky irises growing along the foundation; little more than a trace of murder lingered in patches of claw-kicked grass and crooked weeds. I slipped the driver his fare and stepped onto my sawdust-covered driveway. Police tape stretched from one side of the porch railing to other.

The hole formerly occupied by my front door, was open.

There were no cars in the driveway beside mine.

Two plywood sheets leaned against the siding. Combined, they would've fit over the entrance. I ran my thumb along the door frame, pausing on one splintered hole where a nail had been recently torn out. Within the entry, someone had tidied the wreckage. My areca palm sat drooping but watered in a white plastic potter, and there was a proper, official business card curtsey Caelan on the upright hall table.

I glanced up the street as if expecting to spot his truck parked in the snaking Vilkas driveway, but as I turned an ear toward the house, heard the wooden grind of heavy drawers being opened or shut and a pretty voice cursing my home to hell.

chapter 8

CABINET OR COFFIN?

Samson and Igor were safe in the sheriff's custody, not that I wanted them watched by a man who in throes of transformation had considered them prey.

The gun, however, would've proved real useful in evicting the intruder clicking about Lisa's bedroom in what sounded like high heels.

But was my potential thief a werewolf?

Wasting the last silvered bullet on a human criminal (one dumb enough to sport heels at a break-in), was stupid. One werewolf was dead, but there'd been other watchful golden eyes beneath the oaks.

Hand against my aching thigh, I eased across the threshold, listening for a break in movement, searching the quiet hall for signs of an accomplice. It being my own home, I knew the creaks and where to step to avoid them. As the intruder shuffled through Lisa's bedroom, I slipped into the kitchen and removed my chef's knife from the block. I couldn't find my cell anywhere; there was a good chance it resided in Lisa's room with the intruder. Gram had a landline, but I'd long ago unplugged the dusty relic and shoved it on a basement shelf.

Unless the intruder wanted to take the werewolf's exit through my window, they needed the staircase. I rested a foot on the bottom stair. The throw must've fallen again last night, because, while folded on the rail beside my fingertips, there was a huge, ruddy paw print plastered over the checkered wool, and a wide swipe of rust where a freshly bloodied wolf may have banged the wall in a mad dash to catch up to his prey.

Tamping down the surge of fear at the remembrance of last night, I thumped the wall. “Knock, knock.”

Quiet stretched long enough for me to reconsider the open door.

A low, feminine voice answered, “Who’s there?”

Footsteps moved into the hallway. A dappled hand trailed along the upstairs landing posts. The woman came to a standstill on the top stair, lips pursed, eyebrows lifted. She was somewhere in her early thirties, brown skin blotched white along her throat, face, and hands. Her posture was confident, her smile bright, her nails manicured and sharp.

She wore a pencil skirt and a striped cashmere sweater. Her black hair had been slicked back into a ponytail.

But her eyes, the fathomless depth of lakes on stormy fall afternoons, carried an intensity artists would strive to capture across mediums and centuries.

I gripped my knife tighter. “You’re Stephen’s sister.”

She slid one finger around gold necklace and played with a delicate fish charm. “Say it with more conviction.”

“You’re a werewolf.”

She dropped one heel to the next step and caressed the curves of her backside. “Not feeling a tail,” she mused with an impish grin.

“Not all werewolves have tails.” A guess, based on what Caelan had described as a spectrum of gene dilution. “And not all the time.”

“Ah, true.” She lowered herself another step. “Tell me, sugar, what *do* all werewolves possess?”

A breeze lifted the back of my shirt, a faint temptation to flee. I stood firm.

She dropped the pendent and another step, opened her mouth and let her tongue slide over her pearly whites. “Teeth.”

I flicked the blade’s tip toward the cleaned porch. “And blood.”

Her heels clicked less assuredly on the next step. “Confident, aren’t you?”

“And a smidge dumb. That’s what makes me dangerous. Ask Sheriff Harlowe.”

She descended, this lovely monster of grace and poise, until the tip of

the blade was a thrust away from plush cashmere.

"You're here for your brother's pelt," I announced.

She held her finger to the knife edge, tried to push it aside. I pushed back. Withdrawing her finger, she sucked the blood. "Ouch."

"You're lucky it's 'ouch,'" I continued. "You broke into my home."

She aimed to set her palm on my wrist but retreated a step when a quick flash of the steel nearly lanced her forearm. "Once upon a time, your grandmother said the same."

"My grandmother?"

"When I first entered your home—pleased to learn you support local artists, by the way; I, too, have several pieces of stoneware by Talisha Carter, shame she disappeared—I noticed you've changed the contents of the dining room curio. Your grandmother kept several dolls on display."

"I still dream about some," I said.

"She bought them abroad and underground, claimed their lifelike eyes invited wandering spirits. In return for their good care, the spirits protected your home." The woman rested a hand on her hip. "Evidently you've been slacking."

"No regrets." I shrugged. "They're creepy. Grandma maintained extensive provenance on her pieces. I surrendered one to authorities after the news aired a segment on emergent kuman thong cases. This particular seller had been dry-roasting fetal corpses from an abortion clinic for use in his dolls."

Stephen's sister covered her heart. "How abysmal! And the others?"

"He was the sole problem child. Nothing untoward about the amulets and idols stuffed inside the rest."

"Thank goodness! What angels she kept! Eight or nine on display, accented by the stain of that cherry cabinet."

"A coffin."

"A treasure chest." Sadness played on the woman's wistful smile. "There was this one doll, a girl in a bright blue dress. . ."

"Aaju," I said, a bit taken aback by her knowledge of Gram's collection and a growing certainty she meant me no physical harm. "Grandma purchased her from a medicine man in Greenland. She houses the restless spirit of a *tupilaq*, if you believe in such fairytales. There's a sperm whale tooth sewn into the doll's chest depicting the spirit: equal parts walrus, raven and child. I still have her." I met the woman's dark eyes. "But I don't

have time for a home invader and potential thief. Please make your point before I do.”

“Of course, sugar. We’re both busy women.” She fiddled with her charm. “One afternoon when I was a pup, your grandmother caught me stealing Aaju. She binds my hands and feet together and locks me in with the dolls. Never been so terrified. Ten minutes later, she opens the cabinet, tells me this is the kindest reaction I could ever hope for if I got caught thieving. Says I have worms for brains and if I ever try to steal from her again, she’ll smash open my skull and pull them out one by one and make herself a bowl of spaghetti.” She chuckled. “Your grandmother had such an expressive face, not unlike yourself. I believed her threat, and I believe yours. I confess, you’ve only caught me because I couldn’t leave without seeing if you still had that precious doll.”

I studied my prim and proper thief: she and Stephen shared a certain physical prowess; though she was not the athletic specimen he was, confidence and control ruled her posture.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

She pouted. “We’ve lived alongside one another for years, Marcy.”

“We hardly wave.”

“Your grandmother recognized a bad influence when she saw one,” she said. “I’m Calico Finn.” As if sensing my shock, she tapped one spotted dimple. “Not originally; my parents weren’t cruel. When I turned eighteen I made the legal change to better match my nature, among other reasons. Far sexier than ‘Dalmatian’ or ‘Holstein,’ wouldn’t you agree?”

“Can’t say I’d have chosen the same.” Gram had chosen my new name. Wise, considering I’d been a child, but some days I still resented my lack of say.

“I also answer to ‘Cal’ and ‘Hey, sexy.’” She winked.

“Cal it is.” I moved against the arch leading into the dining room. “I’m going to give you clear and easy access to the front door ...hole. Walk right on through unharmed. However, if as my friendly neighbor you wish to hold a civil conversation and ask after Stephen’s pelt, you may turn around and ring the doorbell.”

Calico sauntered past. “You’re one curious creature.”

“There’s been too much death already; listen close and you’ll hear flies buzzing at the glass.”

She started off the porch, stopped, turned on her heel and pressed one

red nail to the doorbell. The sound resounded through the entry. Without relinquishing my grasp of the knife, I waved her through.

“Hello, Cal.”

“Hello, doll.”

“Marcy.” I wrinkled my nose. “Not a fan of dolls.”

Her smile was soft. “What a shame. I adored your grandmother’s collection.”

“Sorry about Stephen,” I continued, signaling an end to needless chitchat. “He gave more than he took from the world. I’m sorry I never made more of an effort to get to know him.”

“Thanks.” Her posture didn’t waver from a position of strength, but her eyes lingered on the porch. A replaced board marked the spot where Cho’s head had hit. “I suppose I owe you an apology and condolences. Your grandmother often babysat us while you were at school or sleeping over a friend’s. Always had a wonderful, colorful escapade to share. She’s the reason Stephen and I treasure the arts.”

There was a lot to be upset about, but I allowed myself a pleased, “Glad to hear her passion lives on another generation. What do you do?”

She played with her necklace. “I’m a private dealer, but the family owns The Gallery at Chandler and Brent.”

“Sounds like we should be friends,” I said, walking to the kitchen. “I’ll put a kettle on for tea. We can discuss what’s brought you into my home this afternoon and what’ll get you out.” I slipped the knife into its block and reached for the teapot.

Heels clicked across the tile behind me. Fingers tiptoed along my shoulder.

I froze.

“Do you enjoy women, Marcy?” Calico purred.

Her hand pulled away when I touched the knife. “I enjoy people who respect my personal space.”

“You live with a pretty blonde, don’t you?”

“Her name is Lisa, and the man you’ve likely seen on walks with us is her wonderful fiancé.”

“Having a husband didn’t stop my mother.”

“Whatever.”

Cal bit her lip as if in debate over something, then smiled and confidently moved within range of an irritable flick of the chef’s knife. “Since you didn’t know about me, I’m going to guess you don’t know about her, either. See, your grandmother had my mother *obsessed*. I wondered if you drank from the same cup.”

Not about to slash through our tentative peace, I made a show of filling the kettle with an annoyed huff. “It’s my house now, not my grandmother’s. I’ll not discuss who or what my grandmother may have done inside it.” But it sure made me wonder what else I didn’t know. Provided, of course, that Cal was telling the truth.

“I don’t expect you to remember, but when she passed, Stephen sent flowers on our behalf.” Cal perched one foot on the seat of a kitchen chair and laid a hand on her hip. “And to whom shall I be sending flowers when the monster who killed my brother paints a gutty version of the Sistine Chapel in your entry?”

The sheriff had suggested a similar fate. Sweaty, I rubbed my neck and recalled the forged iron heat of the man’s body as the bullet pinged to the tile. Heat was a prime symptom of transformation, wasn’t it? I tested my teeth for a loose wiggle. Nothing.

I turned toward her. “Going to waste your one phone call on flowers?”

Her lips, drawn into a smile through her entire assessment of my

kitchen, tightened to a thin line. “Be grateful if we could keep this nonsense between us girls. Neighborly forgiveness would go a long way toward keeping the harmony between our houses.”

I agreed and offered her a cup. She declined.

“Never had a problem with your family,” I began. “So, I’ll share two facts. One, entry to my home is an invite-exclusive offer. I may not be able to stop pests from entering, but I’ve no qualms about exterminating them. Two, the sheriff explained how werewolves honor their dead. I’m sorry, but I don’t and never have had Stephen’s pelt.”

“Thought as much, but I couldn’t drive past without stopping.” Cal was quick to thumb away her tears, pushing herself toward the exit. “We’re trying to make arrangements. Pelts are returned next-day; thought it’d been delivered here mistakenly when the deputy left last night for your home.”

“In my dresser?”

“I myself am a curious creature.”

“Why not check with the sheriff?” I asked. “He seems nice.”

Her look was appraising. “Oh, is he? We’ve never seen eye to eye.”

“So far,” I admitted. “And he didn’t need to be after what I did.”

“Huh.” She tapped her chin. “Well, sugar—”

“Marcy.”

“*Marcy*, you’ve got to understand, werewolves are creatures of the night. Sheriffs are skilled at operating in a narrow swath of twilight. He wants me in the dark as much as he wants to keep you from it.”

She turned to leave, but I caught her wrist.

“Come,” I told her. Faced with her tear-stained cheeks, I smiled and added, “I’m not going to lock you in a curio, promise.”

She squeezed my shoulder. “Not with these chicken wings.”

“Grad school keeps me busy.”

“Soft and supple is okay with me, sugar.”

I led her upstairs, happy to discover my toppled dresser upright and repositioned. Wouldn't have been hard for Caelan to have figured out the placement, what with the cluster of dusty cat toys in the spot where it'd belonged. Any toy I bought Samson and Igor lived a two minute, free-range lifestyle before being wedged into the most impossible to reach places underneath the narrowest gaps of furniture.

I was happier, thrilled, to find the floor absent decaying flesh and maggots. There were still gouges, stripped sheets, a bullet hole, blood spray on the ceiling, a ruined area rug rolled against the wall, and who knew what in the bathroom, but it was a start. A plastic sheet stapled over my former window rattled the air.

I flipped on the closet light. A flash of terror shot through me at the thought of the she-wolf leaned against the clawed door. I swallowed hard. “The dolls are yours if you want. I've always hated them. Don't believe in guardian spirits, but then I crammed them in a tote and look what happened.” After shifting several boxes, during which Calico asked about the bedroom and I shorted her on answers, I found and hefted the tote onto the bed.

“Cats in dark corners are frightening enough,” I explained, snapping a nail in the process of prying off the lid. Sucking my finger, I nodded at Cal to dig through its contents. “If I ever got around to spring cleaning, I planned on selling them.”

Calico's expression softened. Within seconds the woman was cradling a doll in blue. “What's the wisdom in rewarding someone who broke into your home?”

“Don't get me wrong, I'm pissed, but this is, and I want it to remain, my home. It's clear we share a common enemy, so I'd rather make friends. Besides, I'd rather the dolls belong with someone who appreciates them.”

“I concur,” she murmured, laying the doll into the tote and closing the lid. Her hand extended. “Let's be friends.”

We shook.

“So, new friend,” I said, “last night a werewolf tore open a deputy and tried to tear me open, too. Was he one of yours?”

“No.”

I dragged the comforter from the pile of sheets and passed it to her. “Can you tell if you take a whiff?”

“I’m not a fucking bloodhound.” She chucked it on the floor and sat beside the dolls, laying a protective arm on her gift. The strength in her shoulders diminished. She cupped her face in her hands. “Wish I was. Stephen might’ve been adopted, but he’ll always be my blood, my brother. I don’t know life without him. I don’t want life without him.”

My heart ached. I sat beside her and rubbed her back. “It’s been a few days since werewolves crawled out of fairytales and into my backyard, but I was wondering, are ghosts real?”

“I’ve heard tell dogs can sense the dead.” Calico’s sigh bordered on a soft whine. “Well, I’ve never sensed a soul.”

“So Stephen’s at peace,” I decided.

“I’m not.”

There was a faint tap on the wall.

Sheriff Harlowe stood in the doorway holding a hammer and box of nails. For someone who’d gotten the same or less sleep than me, he made a decent, if not scruffy, impression. He gestured at my companion. “Not sure what trouble you’re brewing, Mrs. Finn, but I’m requesting you please pack up your cauldron and take it on outside.”

Calico wiped her face on her sleeve and rose, pulling me beside her.

“Well, if it isn’t the magnanimous Sheriff Harlowe,” she drawled, shoulders stiff, grip on my palm pythonic. “Told you, girl, I ain’t ever sensed a soul, but I can smell ‘em rotting alright. Never trust a lone wolf.”

Ignoring her, the sheriff met my eyes. “Shall I cuff her, Miss Davins?”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I distanced myself from the pair. “Far as I’m concerned, you’re both intruding.”

“Some sense.” Calico set the tote against her hip. “You have any

more good sense, you'll dine tomorrow night under the protection of Talon."

"Don't go mistaking Miss Davins as fly for your web." Caelan's tone was so pleasant I would've been less afraid if he'd snarled. "Lost more blood to her than you."

Calico's eyebrows rose. "Her?"

"Yes, ma'am." The sheriff gave me the smallest nod. "She's more formidable than she looks."

How he said that with a straight face, I didn't know.

"Well," Cal said, brushing dust from the tote. "Better to lay in my silk than drown in your shit."

The sheriff tipped the hammer toward the hall. "Now, Mrs. Finn."

"Allow me a toad's wink to fetch my broom." She returned to my side, brown eyes unreadable and smile wide. "Dinner's at six."

On her way past the sheriff, the woman repositioned the tote and 'accidentally' banged his hand. The box of nails spilled across the floor. Her heels clicked over the mess and out she went.

"Damn," the sheriff muttered, tilting his head out the doorway to see her gone. "Was hoping karma would catch her grace off-guard."

"It's hard to knock a spider off balance, Caelan."

Shaking his head but smiling, he bent to gather the scattered nails. I moved forward; he waved off my help. "Sorry, Miss Davins; this may be your house but it is also my crime scene. I'll handle this. Please collect your belongings and leave."

"Not happening," I said, backing my ass up onto the bed.

chapter 9

UNRULY HELLBEASTS

When the last nail had been collected, the sheriff placed both box and hammer on my dresser. He didn't seem at all annoyed I'd devolved into a stubborn, arms-crossed two year old.

“Miss,” he said, rounding on me with a parent's caution. “Afraid I have to insist.”

“If you were a vampire, I wouldn't have to deal with this crap.”

“I'd advise against trying that on a vamp,” he warned, “especially those long in the tooth.”

Setting my elbows on my knees, I leered like some kind of sweatpant-wearing gargoyle. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“You mean, why am I at the crime scene I'm in charge of investigating?”

“My house, yes.” I started to lean back, remembered the spray of blood across my balled sheets, and settled with a shoulder against one of the bed posts instead.

The man sighed. “Your housemate correctly assumed you'd go rogue, so here I am on my lunchbreak, making sure you haven't 'busted your stitches and are bleeding out at the kitchen table' as she puts it. I've also got a contractor coming at three to get the place sealed for the night.”

“How kind.”

He thumbed toward the hall. “There's a letter for you on the hall table. On behalf of the Otherworld Society, we appreciate your discretion in resolving this here situation. The CPA will foot the bill for any and all repairs and replacements; no need to go through your insurance, except for medical, and we will see you reimbursed for that. However, their compassion toward human homeowners is finite. If you invite trouble—”

“I solemnly swear to keep the monsters outside,” I promised, hand to heart. “Present company excluded. So, how soon can you get me home?”

He walked the room, pausing briefly at the ruined window frame. “Depends on the true extent of the damage and the contractor’s schedule, but a week or two.” Coming to the edge of the bed, he offered his hand.

I cupped my face instead.

He massaged his temples. “I see where your cats get their personality.”

I perked up. “Are they here? Can I see them?”

“Those demons I left with the soon-to-be Mrs. Wyatt Miller in exchange for confirming your survival.” He flexed the hand Igor had bitten. “Your pair of unruly hell beasts tormented my staff all morning, hiding under desks and swiping ankles.”

“They’re scared.”

“I tried to be nice, let the noxious clouds of fluff scamper about my place while I caught some shut-eye. I’m out two plates, there’s poop in my coat closet, and little Ogre yowled in my ear the minute I fell asleep.”

“You mean Igor.”

“I am quite certain you’ve adopted an ogre, Miss Davins.” He offered his hand again. “So, will you skedaddle, or do I have to carry you?”

“Undecided,” I mused, kicking out my feet.

He stepped out of range. “What’s there to decide?”

“If I’d enjoy the scuffle.” I’d seen more of the sheriff than I’d ever wanted to, okay, that was a lie, but I’d seen what I’d seen, so I knew he had the muscle to make a game fun.

The slightest smile pulled the corner of his mouth. “You’re hurt.”

“Haven’t felt more than a twinge here and there.”

He wiggled his fingers. “Yes or no, Miss Davins?”

Reluctantly, I loosened my grip on the post. The sheriff let me gather my belongings, even helped locate my phone and car keys.

A tightness lingered about his shoulders as he leaned beside the dresser while I jammed sweaters into my largest suitcase. I’d already filled a smaller overnight with cat supplies. “If I could surrender Stephen’s pelt, I would.”

“I believe you,” I said, straining to zip the damn thing shut. “Her brother was murdered. It’s probably been placed in evidence or something.”

“It’ll be released to the family once the investigation’s complete.”

Given the crime, Mrs. Finn is aware standard procedure does not apply.”

“You returned Lisa’s keys quick.”

“We both know her keys bear no relevance on this case,” he said, acting the gentleman and taking my over-stuffed luggage in hand. “The less human involvement, the better. On that note, I recommend a nice vacation for a couple months, maybe a stay with some distant relatives.”

“I don’t have relatives,” I said quietly. “None in America, anyway.”

“Even better.”

The plastic sheeting flapped on a breeze. In the rippled sunlight, the bedroom carried an oceanic pleantry. I walked to my nightstand and flipped my sketchbook shut on the beckoning hand. “How screwed am I, sheriff?”

His gaze dropped to my thigh. “Harder to run hobbled.”

“Cal would argue that’s why I need a pack. Safety in numbers, protection for the weak, yada, yada.” I did my best not to limp as I joined him in the doorway. “What would hobbling behind a lone wolf get me?”

“Lone wolves let you hobble in front,” he said, gesturing for me to hit the stairs.

I moved past him, aware this cordial human specimen had hidden fangs, and winced. My leg hurt worse from the pressure of descent. “Caelan?”

“Mm-hm?” came his diligent reply, a patient step behind.

I twisted around. “Is that what really you do?”

He made a show of rolling his eyes. “You’re a person, Marcy. Not a werewolf, not a wounded doe. If I need to, I’ll work shoulder to shoulder with you as my teammate.”

“So I’m not a werewolf?”

“No.”

“Huh. Interesting.”

He looked quizzical. “How do you mean?”

“Nothing,” I continued, lifting a shoulder. “Thought I might be.”

In the warm spring air the sheriff set aside my bags and leaned against the porch rail. Beyond the flattened weeds on the side of my yard, young leaves produced a hazy green atmosphere surrounding the Vilkas orchard.

“How many questions you got?”

I settled into position beside him. “More than there are hairs on a werewolf’s ass.”

He squinted into the bright sky to follow a hawk’s meticulous circles.

“Well, Miss Davins, I confess I’ve left your gun in my office. Your cats pitched such a hissy fit going in their crates I plum forgot to take it. Now, the contractor’s on his way and I’m sure you’ve sheep to be counting under your housemate’s watch, but if you’re free for supper tomorrow, I’ve got the names of a few decent restaurants ‘round these parts. We could head out to a firing range after. I’d like to see you hit a few targets.”

“Can’t,” I said, even though I needed to improve my aim.

“That so?”

I bumped my shoulder against his. His attention fell away from the hawk. “Are you asking me out because you want to, sheriff, or are you trying to keep me from Calico?”

Expression never wavering from neutral, he tapped his holster. “I’m in the business of keeping you safe, Miss Davins.”

“How positively noncommittal.”

“Any interest I have in you ends where company policy dictates.”

“What I’m hearing is there’s some interest.”

“What you’re forgetting is I’m hunting a murderer. Since he or she has their sights set on you, so do I.” He turned, rested his elbows on the rail and gazed into the organized disaster of an entry. “Mrs. Finn will tell you a lone wolf can’t protect you like a pack. She’s right, but you’d do well to understand pack protects pack first and foremost. Cal isn’t above finding a suitable meat-shield to scheme behind.”

When I reached the apartment, Lisa ripped me a new one, but I had too much going on to offer better than a distracted apology. Samson ran his head and shoulders back and forth against my chest as if offended at the lack of fur on my shirt. Igor, less enthused but chirping, kneaded my lap with tender toes, as if the hidden stitches bothered her.

My cats and my best friend. What more could a girl ask for after a near-death experience?

For the next twenty-four hours I was happy; requested sick leave, rejected Calico's invitation and texted the sheriff no dinner, but drinks were on the table. Later, with the sun low on the horizon and fear an old crow coming home to roost, I was working myself up to cancel on him.

Wyatt arrived with takeout.

"Stay as long as you need," he said as we feasted on fried rice and orange chicken. "Sucks having one bedroom. Amelia has a spare, if you don't mind Coop."

"No offense to Amelia, but the couch works fine. I'm not sure how the cats would react to a baby. Besides, it's a week and a half according to the contractor. He wants me to do a walkthrough with him tomorrow."

"Insurance cover it?"

"Surprisingly, yeah." Did supernatural entities have their own insurance? How complex was their world, and how could it be so well hidden? I added the questions into my phone to save for later under the guise of texting my boss.

Lisa linked arms with Wyatt. "Marcy, it's cool if you want to stay longer. I'm not going home until the psycho who vandalized our porch is caught. You shouldn't have to live in fear, either."

"I'm not. I'm going to live prepared. I called about upgrading security. It'll cost, but hey, I wasn't planning on using my vacation days for exotic travel, anyway."

Wyatt stood. "Well, it's been a stressful few days, wins and losses both. I'm ready to drink. Ladies—Beer? Wine? Cocktails?"

Igor hopped onto his chair and pawed a sliver of carrot to the table's edge.

I shook my head. "None for me, thanks."

"White. Thanks, hun." Lisa pointed a chopstick at the TV. "Speaking

of, wanna marathon ‘Say Yes to the Dress’? I’ve got two months to buy mine before my mom dry-cleans her shoulder-padded monstrosity.”

The doorbell rang. I tensed. Wyatt volunteered to answer.

Igor leaped from her perch, kicking her half-chewed carrot onto the floor in a mad dash. Samson’s head rose at her gravelly snarl. From the way she stiffened, I knew who it was. I flung myself from my chair and pressed my butt against the fridge out of view of the opening door.

Lisa raised her eyebrows and mouthed, ‘What?’

“I’m not here,” I hissed.

“Pardon the interruption,” came the smooth, clear voice. “I was hoping to have a word with Miss Davins?”

“She’s not here!” Lisa shouted.

“Will she back soon?”

Wyatt looked to Lisa. She waved him on. “Yeah. Buying some, uh, lavender tea. She’s had a scary couple nights.”

“Noticed her car in the lot. She go on foot?”

“Aw, shit,” I muttered, dropping my face into my hands.

Helpless, Wyatt glanced again at the pair of us—we shrugged—then turned toward the sheriff. “Would that be a problem if she had?”

“Might could be. We’ve reviewed surveillance videos from around the neighborhood and one game camera. Our suspect observed her comings and goings over the course of several nights.”

My stomach bottomed out. I sank onto the floor. Samson climbed into my lap.

“Oh my God,” Lisa whispered, blue eyes widening in shock.

“Please ask her to exercise extreme caution in her travels. See she gets a ride home. You’ve got my number. You have trouble reaching her after a reasonable hour, give me a holler. I can also arrange to have someone pick

her up.”

“Sure,” Wyatt said.

“Thank you. And would you please give this to her?” There was a soft rustle of cellophane. Igor's posture changed from offended to curious. She wound around Wyatt's leg and stretched toward the crinkly bundle. The sheriff's voice rose in pitch enough to indicate he knew I was listening. “Tell Marcy I am sorrier than a sinner in church, but we'll have to try for another night.”

Wyatt closed the door.

Lisa's jaw dropped. She helped me to my feet. “Girl, what the fuck is going on?”

“Too much,” I said, taking a few steadying breaths.

“He said the psycho was stalking you!”

“We don't know that for sure.”

She gasped. “Do you think they know you're here? Are we safe?”

“We don't even know why he'd be watching me, but maybe we move my car to a commuter lot,” I suggested. “I imagine if we weren't, Caelan, I mean, the sheriff, would take me to a safehouse or put a detail on me or something.” Like Cho.

“I think you're right, Marcy. We're okay here.” Lisa's fiancé came to the table, a vase of colorful daisies crooked in his arm and Igor suctioned to his leg. He flicked a petal at the cat. “So, you didn't want a drink with us 'cause you were planning on getting one with him?”

I shook my head. “I was about to cancel on him.”

Wyatt set the flowers on the table. “Why? What happened this afternoon?”

Samson jumped first, Igor after him. Together the pair sniffed, pawed, and attempted to sample the wrapping.

“Nothing.” My cheeks felt warm. “I realized I’m going out on leave for a week and left no instructions for my restoration of *Ritual Conduit*. I completed the evaluation and haven’t outlined treatment recommendations. I need to get in my office ASAP.”

“After that news, you’re heading out?”

After that news, I wasn’t so sure myself, but I nodded.

“Don’t be stupid.” Lisa passed me a pair of scissors to remove the cellophane. “Your boss will forgive you.”

“She won’t.” But if I wound up fired thanks to Maggie, this was the perfect excuse. “There’s a lot riding on this restoration. It’s a tight timeline.”

“Then have the sheriff go with you.”

I began the delicate process of removing the plastic from the flowers. The second the plastic was lifted, Igor dove in. “Pretty sure he’s busy tonight, given he just cancelled.”

“In person though. He wanted to see you. If you call right now and tell him your dumb idea, I bet he’d give you a lift. He might even still be in the parking lot.” Lisa pushed my phone across the table. “Go on. I know it’s a messy situation, but he is the epitome of the excitement you’ve been craving.”

“Excitement’s overrated.” I scratched Samson’s chin. “I owe Keith an apology.”

“Aim high, Marcy!” Wyatt called from the dining room. “Settle later.”

Lisa sent a warm smile toward her partner. “You never know what one wild, crazy night could lead to.”

“I barely survived the last night. Not keen on instigating another.”

“Yet you’re going to a largely empty building downtown *after hours* knowing some creep has been watching you?” She pushed the sleeve of her sweatshirt back. “Look, goosebumps.”

“Have to, Lis.” I tugged a small, green envelope from Igor’s teeth.

The exterior was an embossed flower: typical florist’s insignia. Inside was taped a print of a famous colonial drawing, one I’d seen in history books, paintings, and flying over Stephen’s yard: a serpent segmented into eighths, captioned by the words, ‘Join, or Die.’

“Well?” Lisa asked, devious grin spreading ear to ear.

“Yeah, I’m not coming back before morning,” I said, pocketing the card before she could see. “Gotta run.”

“You kids have fun!”

The small town, mom and pop hardware store Lisa and I frequented stayed open until nine except on holidays. I hustled in with fifteen minutes to spare. When all was said and done, a new shovel leaned against my hip as I made room in a trunk crowded with restoration supplies. I’d already fit my other new purchases: a high-powered flashlight, batteries, and the largest bottle of Gatorade I could find. The glow from the store dimmed as the overheads flicked off section by section. Mine was the last car apart from employee parking.

The lot backed a community baseball field and wooded residential area—nothing else prominent for a good mile—and nothing else visible in this evening’s thickening fog.

As my hand fell on the top of the trunk, a distinct, gravelly crunch echoed from the direction of the field. A lupine wraith bounded forward with widening jaws. The shovel clattered to the ground. I slammed the trunk and bolted for the driver’s side.

Sirens blaring, lights flashing, the sheriff’s truck pulled into the lot.

On all fours, the werewolf turned, jumped the fence near the third-base dugout, and loped across the pitcher's mound into the outfield. At the absolute edge of my vision, five shadows condensed around it.

A howl struck up, discordant and alien, then the wolves had moved on and the sheriff in. He pulled within a few feet and rolled down his window.

“Told you it’s harder to run hobbled.”

Giving up on the trunk, I slid the shovel into the backseat and smiled up at him. “Another minute and you would’ve scored a free shovel.”

“Awful late for yard work, Miss Davins.”

There was a faint click: the passenger side of his truck being unlocked. I hopped in and shut the door, only for him to step out and warn a lingering employee about a pack of roaming ‘coyotes.’

Returning, he pulled the truck forward and flipped on the low beams. As its light diffused over the foggy field, the sheriff rolled his window up until only a scant seam of an opening remained and cut the engine.

“The better to hear them, my dear,” he said, tugging his ear.

He waited, sitting with one hand on the door, the other a comfortable but brief distance from the gun at his hip. The longer we remained in uneasy quiet, the more suspicious I became of the outside and so the closer I leaned toward him.

chapter 10

LONG DIRT NAP

Every sound brought possibility: wind slithering over the pane, the intermittent tap of his finger against the door, a chain link rattle. After a while, his shooting hand turned the radio low to a blend of classical instruments and static.

“Alright,” Caelan began, adjusting the rearview against the glare of the hardware store sign. “You nixed drinks and a trip to the range but you requested the gun. Now you’ve gone and bought yourself a shovel. Are you planning on putting yourself into an early grave?”

“My plan for tomorrow is gardening. Old shovel’s rusted, so here we are.” Before he could take a pin to my ballooning lies, I added, “What you said about Cho feeding the weeds . . . In a few months when my bearded irises have grown to Viking chieftain lengths and Tammy asks for the fertilizer brand, what do I tell her? The answer is nothing, because they’ll be in a landfill. By the way, thanks for the flowers. The card, not so much.”

“Miscalculated, Miss Davins. Thought you’d accept in person.” He met my eyes. “I’m no stranger to bad decisions. I’m sorry for keeping you exposed in the dangerous situation leading to your injury. Made some big, foolish asks of you, wasn’t right. All because I’d been salivating for the chance to take my pound of flesh from the monster that killed Stephen. I could’ve just shot the damned thing.”

“That a werewolf urge?” I asked.

“It’s a me urge,” he corrected. “Stephen was a very close friend. I was off-duty for a reason and you suffered for it.”

“I wouldn’t have survived without you.”

“Having seen you in action, I can say with certainty you would have held on long enough for the team up the road to arrive,” the sheriff said,

lifting his hand to stop me from interrupting. “I used your complaint as an excuse to return to the scene. I should’ve called it in soon as I noticed your broken door. I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “You kept me in mortal peril. I shot you. I’d call us square.”

He actually looked relieved. “Thank you, Marcy.”

I pointed at my locked car. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ve made a few bad choices myself, and I’ll make a few more before the night’s through.”

“This should help.” He stretched for the small container on the back seat holding my grandmother’s revolver and two boxes of bullets. “Practice.” He jiggled the first box then the second. “Silvered. I included information for a shooting range a few miles west of Bayberry Town Center. Instructor by the name of Antony Vanya agreed to a few private lessons with you. Silvered are less accurate; you’ll need to improve your aim.”

“Thank you,” I said, popping the box of silvered bullets. They seemed brighter in tone, but the difference was slight and most likely intentional given the secretive nature of the Otherworld.

“I don’t make a habit of returning weapons to folks who shot me, especially ones buying last minute shovels, but there are wolves even I can’t keep at bay.”

Setting the bullets on the floor, I looked at him. “What do you mean?”

He drummed the steering wheel. “My boss read my report on Cho’s death and made the determination to extend an invitation to you.”

I pulled the card from my pocket. “Aggressive.”

“They intend to frighten you.” He took the card and tossed it into the center console. “The Otherworld uses this as a plain-sight invitation and banner of pride. Are you familiar with the imagery?”

“Benjamin Franklin created the political cartoon around the time of the French and Indian War,” I said. “I’ve no idea what it means to you.”

“Organization and unity against an outside threat. While the Otherworld’s population composes far less than one percent of the United States, there’s enough activity for a sheriff per state, Marcy. So, where are all the witnesses?”

Rather than wait for the answer stalled in my throat, he rolled the sleeve of his left arm. In the shock of seeing him strip and the impending violence, I hadn’t thought anything of the serpentine tattoo or the mechanics

involved in him or a tatted Stephen shifting.

“Oh,” I said softly, other words and dire concerns tangled on my tongue. Curious, I reached to touch, paused, and then at his permitting nod traced the broken snake along his forearm to his wrist. “Magic?”

“Minor enchantment.” He covered the design. “Every sheriff bears the mark. We’re tasked with distributing invitations and by extension, handling the RSVPs.” He gestured for the revolver, took the box containing silvered bullets and chambered the rounds. “There are two types of humans good with secrets: those with reason and those tucked tight for a long dirt nap.” He passed the weapon over.

I accepted, remembering to check the chamber this time. “Are you inviting me tonight?”

He adjusted the cuff of his sleeve. “You won’t receive a formal invitation until your involvement in the investigation is complete. Thing is, humans are capable of change, but most don’t. If they survive the initial transformation to earn a seat at the table, they kick underneath the cloth, harder and harder, at anyone and anything they can reach, until the head of table ends the mischief.”

“Why tell me any of this?”

“On paper, it’s my job to protect the Otherworld from you and you from the Otherworld. Communities value privacy, lest we reignite the passion for torches and pitchforks. In the wild, however . . .” Fog rolled over the hood. In the formless grey the man seemed somehow lawless and abiding, as if within there had never been waged a war between wolves evil and good as the Cherokee proverb suggested. There had only ever been one wolf, slabbed in tar and violence underneath a cold desert moon, and he observed me now with amber eyes and an unreadable smile. “Mrs. Finn will tell you the badge I carry is a scythe melted down.”

“You kill people.”

“Monsters.”

“Not a denial, Caelan.”

“Monsters wear all skins. One look at your cat will tell you that.”

Taking a deep breath, I watched the fog drift. “Wyatt and Lisa?”

“Haven't seen anything inexplicable.”

“Are they safe from the psycho who did this?” On top of everything else, I couldn’t even begin to fathom why someone would watch me, let alone who. “Am I safe to stay with them?”

“I reckon you are, for a time. A game trail runs between your house and the Vilkas orchard. According to Mrs. Finn, the camera that captured images of our suspect is one of several around the property used for monthly hunts. They weren’t due to collect the SD cards for another week, but Stephen’s death prompted them to check.”

“Who is he?”

“We’re working on it. Footage is blurry. Seems a spider took a shine to the camera. Until I have more detail, take extra care to notice your surroundings.”

Of course. I rubbed my forehead. “So if I do everything right and manage to survive whatever the hell is happening here, I then have to survive becoming a werewolf. That doesn’t seem fair.”

“That’s life,” he said quietly.

“How do you strike someone from your invite list?”

He squeezed my knee. At the same time, his bright, inquisitive eyes remained focused on mine. “You understand the card, don’t you, Miss Davins?”

Denial heated my tone, yet my face remained cold and wet. I thumbed a tear—“Shit.”—and angled my knee away from his warm, human touch. His hand returned to his lap. Gathering my hair to one side, I tilted my head toward the window to expose the pale curve of my throat. “Say two months from now we catch the murderer and your boss gives the go-ahead. I accept. You what, lean over and give my neck a nibble?”

He shook his head. “I never bite with the intention of turning.”

“Never?”

“You’re addressing a lone wolf, Miss Davins, a population-controlled subspecies at that. I follow different guidelines than the average werewolf.”

I gave him some serious side-eye. “You’re not fixed, are you?”

“God, no!” He chuckled. “No bites, no whelps, them’s the rules.”

“That why you’re so keen on maintaining a business atmosphere?”

“Fun’s allowed,” he drawled with an eye to my neck as I smoothed my hair back into place. “But where deeper feelings develop, the instinct to create proves difficult to resist. I’ve seen the results and choose to stay well clear of entanglements. Stressed enough keeping my own hide intact.”

“Shame,” I said. “So if not you, who?”

“If you decide to join us, you’ll be paired with a transmission specialist to get turned into a local Were variant or another species native to

the area. Northern states have high densities of werewolves. Given your proximity and relationship to Talon pack, Mrs. Finn would mentor you. She does a good job with the survivors.”

“Survivors?”

“The first transformation is harder on the human body than on natural born werewolves. Humans weren’t built to shapeshift. The body doesn’t always figure it out; sometimes it screws up the change.”

"And if I decline your invite?"

“You’ll be destroyed.”

“By you?”

He shook his head. “Boss doesn’t waste my time digging holes for small potatoes. There’s other, nastier sheriffs eager for a chance to do to you worse than what was done to Cho and Stephen.”

I grimaced. “Have you followed up on rejections in the past?”

“Once when I was shadowing.” He lifted a shoulder. “I’m banned from our After Care program.”

“Why?”

With a loud exhale he set his hand on the ignition and twisted the key. The world around us lit up misty. A pair of luminescent eyes flashed beyond the hood. The pallor of bleached rawhide, the werewolf was difficult to discern except for its eyes and the frothy glint of fangs.

In the time it took me to flinch and lift the revolver, Caelan had popped his door and stepped outside.

Aware of the glass barrier separating its teeth from my throat, I pointed the gun steady at its chest. The animal rose onto long haunches, screamed and raked its claws across the hood.

The sheriff fired a single round.

Force of impact spun the werewolf as it dropped. I leaned over the dash to glimpse the hulking form on three legs, one paw held against its chest. Within feet the fog had closed around its tucked tail.

The fence near the dugout jangled and clanked. We heard a grassy thud and the soft rustle of escape.

Caelan hopped into the truck, reversed to my old clunker of a car and instructed me to stay put. He had me pass him a flashlight from his glove box, then inspected my vehicle for foul play and unwanted occupants. Satisfied, he came around to my side of his truck and opened the door, offering his hand.

Palm against palm, I hesitated, fascinated by the shifting bone underneath. The reality of a werewolf's existence was so hard to grasp, and yet the undeniable truth stood before me.

Politely asking for his hand back.

Whoops. I swapped his hand for the revolver as I stepped down. "You're sure it's safe?"

He nodded. Beyond his reassurances swirled a quiet, pale unknown. "Time for you to go, Marcy."

Once I was safe inside my own vehicle, he leaned against the frame, glancing toward the outfield and periodically at me. He swayed, bounced on his heels as if ready to run into the night.

"Need help?" I asked.

He looked surprised. "Doing what?"

"You know," I said, gesturing at his attire. "Someone to watch your back while you shift."

"Lone wolf," he replied, excitement riding his tone. "Worry about yourself, Marcy. There's a way through this mess, but the path is narrowing. If you disappeared before the investigation's over, I would be inclined to avoid a beating for losing track of a human and mark your record as deceased."

I frowned. "And what, skip town with Samson and Igor? Never contact Lisa, Wyatt or my other friends? Lose my job and education? Risk Stephen's killer escaping after me? I'm building a good life. I didn't do anything wrong. I won't look over my shoulder day and night. I know how this goes. I've done this before and—"

"You have?"

I clammed up.

He reached as if to pat my shoulder, thought better of it, and let his hand fall to his belt. "I'm sorry, Marcy. One way or the other, it's join or die."

I jammed the key in the ignition. "Leave me alone a couple days," I grumbled. "Even the highlights are a lot to process."

"If I'm able." He leaned down to meet my eyes. "Please, Marcy, promise me you'll keep the shovel in your trunk until sunrise."

"Not a chance."

“Fine.” He pulled away, cracking his neck. “Have a safe evening, Miss Davins.”

“Same, sheriff.”

The wolf headed after his prey.

I took the appropriate turn back to Lisa's, except, twenty minutes later, picked up I-84 Westbound instead. Whatever followed me to the hardware store may have seen me lugging bags this afternoon and already determined where I was staying, but I couldn't knowingly bring trouble home, not to mention I wanted to prevent additions to the Otherworld's guest list. If my car wasn't in the lot and the sheriff was hunting the accomplices, perhaps Lisa and Wyatt were safe another night.

I wished I didn't have to lie to them.

Instead, as mile markers ticked past, green flashes on an empty roadway, I informed Lisa I'd taken a room at the Hartford Marriott. She oohed, teased and 100% would not believe me when I swore the sheriff was sleeping in his own bed.

By the New York state border I was certain no one had followed, especially once the car behind me had kept straight as I turned off the exit and hit the backroads. The name of this particular stretch of Appalachian Trail I didn't know, but the location featured several smaller loops for casual hikers and a stunning overlook of the Hudson River. There was a small park entrance three miles farther marked by the typical 'closed at dusk' signage. If you wanted a lower, less scenic trail, you could follow a creek's slow bleed into the main river. Those trails were marked by notched bark and widened dirt shoulders: no trail openings, no closings. I counted three, then pulled over and cut the engine.

The road was a quiet blue beneath the vast Milky Way. I cracked the windows, waited forty minutes watching and listening for the slightest hint of trouble.

The sheriff claimed werewolves were the dominant species of the north, not the only species. Alone in the forest where rescue would not come fast, easy, or at all; myths and legends crept from the gallery of my imagination. Demons were never far from artists. In a witching hour filled

with twinkling stars and towering pines, fiends and black magic specters climbed from their gilded frames and tapestries to haunt me.

I told myself I didn't have to walk the woods. Chickening out was acceptable given the circumstance, but I had to know and needed the night. Daylight brought a higher risk of human interference.

I slipped my grandmother's gun into my purse, leaving it unzipped for access, then exited the vehicle and popped the trunk under the night's nebulous stillness and the crunch of pine needles. I always carried extra cotton and powder free nitrile gloves for handling delicate pieces during conservation consultations on the road. I stuffed a pair of each into my purse. After dropping batteries into my new flashlight, I flicked it off, shouldered the shovel, and started up the nearest footpath. A hundred yards in, I located the boulder Gram and I had used as a marker and broke from the trail.

Except the first night, I'd never come after sunset, hadn't returned at all since Gram died. Walking off trail amongst the sundown sounds and smells made for a writhing knot in my stomach, but light might attract unwanted attention.

Spring was alive with insects, frogs, and owls, so different than the summer evening all those years ago when thunderheads loomed dry and baleful over the parched landscape. In the sway of branch and bough, I could almost hear Gram urging me to hold my gaze low.

If fear won, it'd be over. The vines and forest debris would give way to the flick of an arrowhead tail, a pale sneer, a scrape of horns. I'd be back in the car speeding toward Connecticut without uncovering the truth.

I stuck to flipping on the flashlight as needed for better footing or if the crackle of brush drew close; luckily my worst encounter was a squinting opossum. The rushing burble of moving water strengthened. Ahead, a stream rode a path wide and deep, funneled through layers of stone and boulders to reach the river at a photogenic crossing.

There was one tree here often skirted, Grandma had said, one hikers found no rest beside, for it seemed Maleficent herself had crowned it a mocking tribute to the parents of Sleeping Beauty. The tree had withstood a

thousand storms, bore blistered bark from lightning strikes, and permitted to live within its thorned shade none but the most toxic of weeds.

She'd been exaggerating, but the spindly, twisted branches of the locust variant pricked my memory just the same. Back then, lightning flashed overhead, illuminating massive branches and curled leaves. Tonight, my light flashed on and up, roved over gnarled bark and thorns. I oriented myself toward the stream and paced from the trunk outward.

Northern Monkshood had overgrown the location, glossy emerald stalks in the spring, but I knew it was right from the marker. Leaning the flashlight against the tree and my purse nearby, I pushed the point of the shovel underneath the vaguely dove-shaped rock. Shadows stretched like beckoning claws as I overturned the anonymous grave marker.

The first time, we'd worked a hard dust and harder sweat. Tonight, the soil was moist and soft, as if this particular hell wanted to be raised.

Gram had taken me out from under the tree, promised I'd be safe, that we were okay now, then asked if I was brave enough to help.

When we'd finished digging, we carried a plywood crate from her truck, laid it among the roots and checked the depth. I was sweating; my arms hurt from shoveling, my belly from fear, and my eyes from crying.

Promising we were almost done, she made the final, leveling adjustments. If I wanted, and used gloves, she warned, I could lay a purple wildflower on the box.

She returned a good hour later, stooped and stumbling, a blanketed mass heavy around her shoulders in a position she'd later taught me called a fireman's carry. More than once I heard the rustle and slip of leaves as she made her way beneath the sharp branches. With an exhausted grunt of effort she dropped the body to the ground and sat beside it, chest heaving, white as a cotton sheet. A dark, malodorous stain had dribbled through part of the blanket and into the fabric of her shirt.

I sat, weeds gripped in my gloved palm, watching with confusion,

anger, and astonishment, as she recovered her strength and pulled a pocket mirror and tube of lipstick from her backpack.

“Love put him here,” she told me, using the light of the storm-plagued heavens as a guide to outline her lips in luscious pink. “Don't want him to forget. Don't want you to forget. It was love.”

She leaned over and kissed his blanketed forehead.

Cross-legged on the ground, alone with my memories, I caught my breath. My arms ached, the stitches throbbed, but I felt too exhausted and cold-hearted to cry. The shovel lay balanced in a mound of upturned dirt and broken moss. I closed my eyes, gathering a fresh round of strength, and pried the lid.

The wood cracked in a brittle snap. A thin haze of dust floated into the starlight.

Once mine, the blanket, the last blanket to know the touch of my mother as she tucked me in, lay tattered and stiff in decay. Etched into the stained fabric were a faded lipstick kiss and greyed husks of wolfsbane.

I slipped my fingers into the nitrile gloves, then those into the white cotton pair and positioned myself over the body.

One disintegrated chip at a time, I peeled away flakes of blanket. The flashlight dimmed and flickered. Nauseous, I rocked back on my heels, recovered, and ran my finger along a fractured jawbone the anatomical proportions of which had escaped from a box far older and more storied than this.

“Hey, Gramps,” I said.

Men weren't the only monsters in my woods, after all.

chapter 11

NYCTINASTY

Though the memory had collected nearly two decades of dust and distortion, the hair on my neck rose in a cold sweat at the sight of the slack jaw and desiccated, eroded muscles.

Twenty minutes to midnight, after a peaceful evening cupping fireflies and building s'mores, Grandpa had chewed through my parents, my older and only sibling Rhetta, and my paternal grandparents. When he was in the ground I thought it was over, believed Grandma when she said my nightmares howled and clawed because children cope differently.

But now, finally, proof.

"You're a monster," I told his corpse.

Grandma had cleaned the crime scene. Here and there over the years I'd asked how she managed to make us disappear without a trace. She'd brush me off, saying the war had taught her, but with the sheriff's business card lining my pocket I suspected otherwise now.

My job had been to stay quiet or parrot the lies. If I uttered a word out of place, she warned, the authorities would separate us and she would burn bright in the fires of hell before she ever allowed her family to be torn from her arms again.

Wiping my eyes on a filthy sleeve, I sat at the grave's edge. "I can't visit them. I don't even have pictures. Every night I light a candle and hope they aren't forgotten in the woods rotting in cheap plywood like you."

The older I got, the more I wanted to find their graves, but Gram took that secret to hers. Finding them wouldn't heal me or change the past, but after years of sowing secrets and dreaming blood, I wanted so badly to

replace my final memory of them with one more peaceful.

Sun-warmed headstones on a grassy hill, a seaside vista she'd scattered their ashes over, bronze plaques in a mausoleum – any outcome was better than dying and forgotten.

To her own dying day, Gram claimed she didn't know what transpired in the workshop between Gramps and Grandpa Olexei to cause the 'snap.'

All I knew was that there had been a fight that ended with Grandpa Olexei's head dropped on the fly tying station over spilled beer and trout lures. He'd been 'hacked to bits' according to Gram.

Dad's scream had woken Rhetta and me in our room down the hall. He'd died in bed. A stab to the heart had "killed him quicker than a sneaker smashes an ant."

Strange knives, I thought in the present hour, lifting a shriveled, padded palm and black claws.

By the time Rhetta and I had run into the hall, Mom was already there, soaked in blood from her headwrap to her thighs, holding her bedroom door closed with chemo-thinned hands.

"Mom!" I made a break for her.

"Run!" she shrieked in a pitch that stopped me cold. The door banged so hard her entire body bounced.

Rhetta dragged me screaming from the hall and into our bedroom as our mother cried for Gram. My sister dropped to her knees and tore books, toys and shoes from underneath the bunkbed.

She pointed to the cleared space. "You first."

"I don't wanna go first." I backed toward the hall. "I want Mom."

"You have to."

“No.”

Rhetta’s brown eyes were wild with fright, but my sister had always been quick. Her attention landed on my bedspread, where Samson, the kitten Mom let us keep after grandma’s cat gave birth, stood fuzzy and hissing. Rhetta snatched him in her hands and threw him underneath.

“Now you’re second,” she said, hugging me. “Sammy’s a baby. You’ve gotta protect him how I’m gonna protect you and Mom’s gonna protect us.”

I crawled under. Samson darted for the side but I caught and held him. Rhetta cleared room for herself. I helped her with my free hand, pushing through junk we’d been too lazy to clean.

Mom’s bedroom door burst open with a resounding bang. Mom must’ve hit the wall, ground, or both, because she let out a pained grunt.

“Izzy?” Grandma Nerine’s voice joined the fray on a curious note and ended in a scream.

Rhetta threw herself flat and crawled underneath. “I’m too close to the edge,” she said. Tears glistened on her cheeks. “He’s gonna see.”

I grabbed her hand. “Mom,” I said.

“Mom,” she replied and tugged the comforter over the edge, blocking my view except a small section of our open door.

Quiet fled the hall, pursued by a low, gurgling snarl. Footsteps fell padded and eager on the tile.

The hall nightlight multiplied the shadowed horrors as a man-shaped monster limped closer, pointed ears erect, protruding jawline dripping blood. A kitchen knife quivered in the shaggy mane of its neck.

Rhetta covered my scream.

The shadows converged into flesh and fur.

“Don’t,” Mom pleaded from somewhere low and grounded, the wet smack of her palms desperate as she dragged herself along. “Dad, daddy, not the kids. Please. Not my babies.”

The last I saw of Mom was a twitch in the hall. Her diamond wedding ring sparkled brighter than the blood on her wrist.

Rhetta was right about Grandpa, and we were too young and scared to realize our hiding spot was no hiding spot at all. She’d held me so tight her nails tore my palm.

As he reached our doorway, the monster spoke. It was this fact alone that for so many years allowed me to believe Gram when she said there were no monsters, only men. He *spoke* and more than twenty years later I still heard the strained German accent clear as day in my mind. “Girls,” he called, “You forgot to say goodnight to me. Come on out and give Gramps a big kiss and a hug.”

We kept still and quiet, but with unwavering certainty he tore off the comforter and reached beneath the bed. He took Rhetta. She’d been holding my hand so tight her fingernails tore into my palm as she was wrenched screaming into the air.

My sister screamed and screamed over the grind of teeth against bone, her hair a curtain swaying across discarded toys. When her fingers brushed the floor limply, he flung her on the mattress.

By then I’d pushed myself as far back as I could.

Gramps lowered himself to the floor on hairy knees and elongated forearms. Chin smearing blood across the oak, his head swung almost serpentine from a gurgle in the hall toward the bed’s underneath, blotting the light except what glossed the edge of one patinated copper eye.

Black fuzz sprang over my hands. With the yowl of a compressed squeaker, Samson sank his miniscule teeth into the werewolf’s nose.

Gramps howled, shoved his shoulder against the bunk so hard the frame tipped into the wall. Rhetta's leg, absent a chunk of calf, popped into view.

A blinding flash. A bang to rattle my ears and knock Samson off his paws. Grandpa's body fell stone-still, distorted proportions outlined by the nightlight. The bunk rocked itself stable.

A hand came reaching; Samson bit with the same fury—but the ensuing shriek belonged to Gram.

She laid down to see us. Blood seeped beneath her cheek and matted her silver hair. Tears drizzled into the thicker liquid. "Close your eyes now, sweet. You keep your eyes closed and hold Sammy."

I couldn't talk. I hadn't talked, not for days after.

"If there is anything you ever need to do in this world, it's shut your eyes. Can you?"

I could.

I had.

After, when we were trolling the river bank for a suitable marker, she told me she'd loved a monster, but because she loved him, she couldn't bring herself to kill him until it was too late.

A mosquito buzzed my neck. I slapped it and in a fit of rage kicked the crate and screamed. The frame shuddered. In the flickering beams of spent batteries, a gleam of metal caught my eye: golden, rather than the storm cloud hue of bullet casings, wedged between mouldered canines.

Gramps was dead, but, his deformed chin tipped in my hand, something unnerving waited in his stillness that made me hesitate as if my forefinger teased the cyclopean weave of a black widow's web.

I separated his yellow sneer and fished a pair of rings off his withered tongue. The first was his wedding band. The second was designed with the heft of a class ring; steel inscribed with two eagles whose outstretched wings framed a swastika.

"You liberated her camp," I mumbled, using my phone to snap several careful photographs of the ring. "She said you were with the

American soldiers who liberated their camp.”

Gram had also said she never loved anyone more; I couldn't understand how she'd loved him at all. He murdered our family. He might've been a Nazi. Why else the deliberate placement of their emblem on his tongue to further curse his bones?

Dawn blushed in the eastern sky as I returned the rings and replaced the lid. The cheap batteries died in my flashlight. I did my best to fill the grave, adjust the marker and erase the disturbance. Being early spring, nature would fast overgrow my evidence.

Finished, I regarded the locust's thorns and the swaying toxicity of weeds over rooted bones.

Wolf bones.

Wolf bones meant wolf blood.

What did they mean for me?

Wiping dirt on my jeans, I headed for the car and sped home to intercept the contractor and the installer for my new security system. A cruiser was parked in front; Caelan had anticipated my homecoming and sent someone to monitor the property.

Word had gotten out about my hospital stay. I arrived to a few Get Well Soon cards and a bundle of roses from Keith. I gave him a call, explained it was kind of him to think of me, but I would not be thinking of him going forward, and ended the call when his mother jumped on the line, having apparently been on speaker the entire time.

Mid-afternoon, with the walkthrough complete, I ripped the name off the roses and took them to the Vilkas residence. It seemed silly to think that seventy yards of woods separated the estate mansion from a neighbor who had tolerated a broken garage door since November.

The air reeked of apple blossoms and charcoal. Smoke thinned against the cloudless sky. Fewer vehicles were parked outside than before, but several voices rose above the orchard's iron gates.

I made my way along a walkway lined with hyacinth and daffodils to a wrap-around porch. Wreaths adorned with bottlebrush rabbits hung over the double doors. Both had been draped in black silks. Floral arrangements crowded the Vilkas porch. Wondering if perhaps I should have brought a

casserole instead, I rang the bell.

A boy answered, the one I'd seen holding Calico's hand. He stood a mighty two and a half feet tall, with a stern pout and narrowed brown eyes. A silver stud glittered in one ear lobe. He angled a plastic truck back in his hand, presumably to chuck at me, the stranger danger crowding his doorstep.

The perk of having a youngster answer meant I didn't have to peer around him to glimpse the magnificent interior. The entry featured marble floors, a grand staircase (worn, dirty carpet treads covered each step), several family photographs, abstract metalwork, and the striking yellows of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* painting.

Add to that assessment high ceilings, décor securely nailed to the walls, and an open-concept design, and the idea a smoke-tinged evening of fine liquor and werewolves wasn't such a stretch to the imagination.

I lifted a hand, to both wave and get the flowers in a position better suited to deflect the toy. "Hi. I'm your neighbor, Marcy. I live in the light grey house. Is Calico home?"

"No."

"Do you know when she will be?"

"No."

I squatted on my aching calves to reach his level. Digging was bad enough; digging with stitches amplified the pain hours later as my muscles dropped off their adrenaline-fueled high. "Is there a grownup I can talk to?"

"No."

"Your backyard sounds busy."

A pause. His hand lowered, head turned back. "No."

"You shouldn't be opening the door then," I huffed. "Didn't your mom teach you about strangers?"

"No."

"Is that all you know?"

"Be polite, Aiden." Calico Finn sauntered into view in a pair of high heels and a pink silk robe. Flipping straightened hair over her shoulder, she

took first the toy, then the frowning toddler, into her arms.

I creaked upright with the groan of an elderly woman. “Afternoon, Calico.”

She laid a free hand on the hip opposite the kid. “Friends call me Cal.”

“Afternoon, *Cal*,” I corrected, eyeing her attire. “This a bad time?”

“Yes,” Aiden hissed.

Shaking her head, Cal gave him a gentle bounce. “We’re having a late lunch. Family’s planning the service.” Her gaze fell on the roses. “No pelt?”

“No, and sorry I couldn’t make dinner. Too much to rearrange on short notice.”

Her smile was warm. “Lunch will do.”

“I couldn’t.”

“You must. We’ve got more food than Aiden and I could eat in a year. Put those flowers down and come inside. I want you to meet everyone.”

I set the roses beside a wicker chair. “Your pack?”

“My most trusted family.” She raised her hand to block me as I entered. “Woah. Hate to say it, but, sugar, you’ve gone sour. What have you been rolling in?”

I hadn’t arrived home in time to shower, so the poor contractor, security guy and I had been chatting in the driveway when my sleep-deprived brain had decided to swing by.

“Thought you weren’t a bloodhound.”

“Hun, a whale could smell you ten miles off shore.” Her nose wrinkled. “A literal stinking human! I can hear Mina now . . . How about this: your home is in shambles. Hop in my shower and wash the grime out of your rat’s nest. We’ll make a spot for you at the table.”

Embarrassed, I backed off the porch. “No, I’ll come back.”

“You’ll work yourself into a sweat on the walk,” she said.

“My house is right there,” I said. “It’s not even that hot.”

She shook her head. “It’s my neighborly duty to help, and my responsibility as your friend to ensure you leave a sparkling impression on the pack. Think of it as a small token of my appreciation for Aaju and the rest. Marcy, darling, I insist.” She set the boy on the ground. “Run out to the patio, Aiden. Ask Aunt Mina to please prep one more burger. We have a special guest.”

Once he’d stormed off, she draped her arm around me and whispered, “He’s at that age where getting him in the tub is like trying to soak a full grown man in acid. I’m begging you, save me the tantrum and use my shower.”

I considered the state of my house and Caelan’s comments about being used as a meat shield, then leaned against her to pull off my sneakers. This was a rare opportunity to gain insight and knowledge of werewolf life.

“Thank you,” she said, dumping my shoes outside. “Don’t worry about a thing. Pippin Manor is the pack estate; we’ve more bottles of shampoo than wine in our cellars.” She trotted up the curved staircase. I followed more slowly, drawn to the painting of cheerful sunflowers surrounded by family portraits.

Her hand touched mine on the rail.

“Oh, right,” she said against my hair. “You’re one of my kind.”

“Where’d you get this?”

“Stephen had it commissioned as a gift for my thirtieth. Sunflowers, the color yellow—thought to evoke gratitude, devotion, loyalty, happiness... Everything he wished me to find.”

Weighing my chances of disappearing versus confirming my suspicions, I asked to view the painting closer. Calico obliged with a tight-lipped smile. When I’d finished my examination, I turned to her. “I was lucky enough to view the original on exhibit in Amsterdam a few months before it was stolen. The oil paint used in the creation of the piece discolors over time, more so in the presence of improper lighting. Given the circumstances of your entryway, your artist has done a remarkable job in imitating what the current paint may resemble. Who are they?”

“Never met him,” she said serenely, linking arms. “But if you love this imitation, you’ll never want to leave upon seeing my original Manet. Now, what’s brought this raggedy kitten to my doorstep?”

“I’ve got a couple questions for you.”

“What a coincidence. So do I.”

She led me to the first of two master suites. Stephen’s was located on the left wing of the home, overlooking the street. Cal kept to the right, with a view of the orchard’s rolling hills.

Paintings lined the upstairs halls. I kept quiet in my observations, but as we entered the bathroom found myself saying, “Haven’t been caught since Gram, have you?”

“I promised myself I’d never fuck up again.” Calico, who had leaned into the glass shower to start the water, now sprawled along the tiled length of a Jacuzzi, fussing with her robe. “Let’s chat while the water warms.”

The foggy glass suggested it was plenty warm already. Nevertheless, I sat beside her. “You must’ve noticed I’ve got cats.”

“Two, if the pictures are accurate,” she said. “I remember the old one from our visits. Such a sweetheart.”

“My grandma was born on her family’s farm somewhere in rural Germany. They were never without a good mouser. The only time she didn’t have a cat were her years spent imprisoned in Dachau. Shortly after her liberation, she befriended a stray in the streets; Samson’s great great great grandmother or something. ‘Marcy, you can learn a lot from cats,’ she’d tell me. ‘A good cat knows what’s coming before you do.’”

Hand on her chin, Calico leaned forward with rapt attention. “Go on, love,” she purred.

“You aren’t feline, but you know what’s coming when this investigation concludes, don’t you? Harlowe said you mentor new

werewolves.”

Her eyes rolled. “Shithead gave you the talk, didn't he? He's not supposed to. I can report him.”

“Please don't,” I said quickly. “I appreciate his warning.”

“Oh, I wouldn't dream of ratting on a terrier.” She pulled a clean towel from a shelf to her left. “Sheriffs are cunning. Harlowe didn't warn you; he started a game. They love games, Marcy. If he's gone and involved you, there's a reason he wants you on the board.”

“Apart from making a mess, he's been helpful.”

“He's an experienced player.” She laid a dappled hand on her robe. “We'll talk boys later, hun. Important shit first. Give me a direction for now, a teaser of what you want. Ask me anything, right here, right now.”

I accepted the towel. “I'm more of an ask now, think of a better question in the shower, type of gal.”

She smiled. “Fun.”

Waving at her to shoo, I unbuttoned my shirt. “Werewolf genes pass through generations, right?”

“Yes.”

“How quickly do they dilute?”

“Depends on how diluted they are at the progenitor. Often it takes ten, eleven generations before the traces of werewolf are a fifty-fifty percentage of inheritance on the slimmest margin. Could be the difference between you being a carrier with decent eyesight at dusk and your sister a regular human.”

“People with suppressed wolf traits, if they got bit, does anything change?”

“They've already got the curse; extra bites don't increase potency. Many have tried, to unfortunate and tragic ends, but there's no changing what you are.” Though her eyes were unreadable, they weren't without a certain hunger. “Except for purebred humans.”

“Is there a way someone with a stronger heritage might not realize they've got werewolf blood?”

The woman tilted her head. “Do you believe you're blood?”

“No,” I lied. “I'm wondering about someone I know.”

“Well,” she said, looking hesitant. “No doubt Harlowe has explained

how we ‘stick’ in one shape if silver breaks our skin. I suppose if you were stuck and didn’t know or couldn’t access the embedded silver, sure. Works on sheriffs.”

“What do you mean?”

“Born a wolf, raised a monster. Watch yourself around him, Marcy. You and I are food first.” Calico moved toward the door. “Now if you’ll excuse me, Aiden will have worked our pack into a frenzy.”

chapter 12

THE REAPER

Water stung my thigh. The warmth made my exhausted body drowsy. I'd wrapped a towel around my chest and was trying to recall if showering broke a cardinal law about caring for new stitches when someone knocked.

"You decent, sugar?" Calico strolled in regardless. "Brought you one of Evie's sundresses. This pink won't do you any favors, but I can't have you shambling ragged through my halls."

"Who's Evie?"

"Stephen's wife."

"Oh." I blanched. "Given where his pelt was found, I don't think that'd be appro—"

"Poor woman's an absolute wreck and still she donates the clothes off her rack. How could you refuse?" Cal gave me privacy to change.

"So you're Stephen's little sister?" I asked, knotting my jeans and shirt in a plastic bag she'd provided. "Forgive me for saying, but you look nothing alike."

"My parents couldn't get pregnant. Of course, less than a year after they'd brought him home, here comes the queen." She pulled a few black hairs off her brush and handed it to me. "Flea-free."

I laughed and started at my knots.

“Lipstick?” she continued, testing a matte pink in the mirror. “I’m an excellent applicator.”

“Not now.”

She blew a kiss.

“The sheriff calls you Mrs. Finn. Is there a Mr. Finn?”

“We’re in the process of finalizing the divorce papers.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I. My lesser half ditched us for a job with the Vatican museum. It’ll be rough going forward solo, worse without Stephen to act as Aiden’s substitute father figure. He’s got a devil of a mother already; where’s he gonna find balance? Stephen was our GPS. Whenever I’d strayed too far he’d be there with directions on how to get home and attractions to visit along the way. We were a team, him and I, more than I ever was with my husband.” Her eyes were soft, downcast. “I’m not ready to spend forever missing him.”

With all that’d been dug up recently, my heart stirred. Setting aside the brush, I felt close to tears myself.

Cal, hands limp in her lap, jumped when my fingertips brushed her shoulder.

“In ancient periods, artists often portrayed morality through musculature and form. From what I’ve known of Stephen, he seems every bit a hero of old.”

Her smile wavered. “He was.”

“Don’t forget you’ve got Aaju now to watch over Aiden, at least while he’s in the house.” I armed her with all the knowledge I possessed about the dolls, then steered the conversation toward a pack curiosity of mine: had Stephen’s death made her the alpha?

“Evie refused to take his place on the grounds she’s got no blood or bone left in the pack to justify ruling. Like I have time for her noble shit with a pup to raise and a business to run. I was the adviser telling Stephen which strings to pull when. Now I’m the ear everyone whispers into. I can’t even plan his service without thirty emails claiming to know his favorite hymn.”

“You’ll get through,” I said, unsure what more to add.

She pulled a fuzzy off my dress. “Life changes more than werewolves do.”

“Was Stephen born a werewolf? Are there adoption agencies for the supernatural?”

“Yes, there are, but no, he wasn’t. Adopting humans is frowned upon in the Otherworld, but my parents knew his birthmother. He grew up knowing what we were and had a choice when he was old enough to understand.”

“What if he’d chosen human?”

She sighed. “Society rules might appear unkind under the microscope, but they work. Doesn’t mean I hate sheriffs any less. Life’s one complicated bitch. We’ve a few of those in the pack as well. Shall we meet them?”

“Sure.”

“Oh, mind your fingers, Marcy. It is lunch time.” Laughing, she took my arm. “Joking, sugar. We’re all house-trained and good around other animals.”

Calico had paid a small fortune for her kitchen. Sixteen foot ceiling with a nifty office loft and enormous windows to draw in the beauty of the

orchard. Marble counter-tops, a kitchen range and hood from a company whose low end appliances sold for more than my college tuition, custom tile — every element, from the handcrafted ceramic fruit bowl to the live edge oak table, indicated an appreciation of craftsmanship.

As she poured two glasses of chardonnay to ‘calm our nerves,’ I caught sight of a Caravaggio that hadn’t seen the open market for fifty years. There was nothing I dared do in the current moment, and from her smile Calico knew it.

“Some fakes are worthy of their own extensive provenance. Wouldn’t you agree, Marcy?”

Art dealer, indeed.

Her kitchen slider opened onto a sunny deck and patio complete with a grill, fire pit, pool, and several pieces of outdoor furniture. A stone walkway led to a distant shed. From there, the trail diverged under the apple blossoms.

Apart from Aiden banging his truck along a deck rail, nine wolves lounged in their human skin. According to Cal, the rest of the pack was either running errands for the impending public memorial or searching the orchard for missed clues.

The new alpha tapped her glass, not that she needed to: every head had turned as our feet hit the warm deck. “This is our neighbor and friend, Marcy Davins. She’s the human who glimpsed Stephen as he fled for his life and reported it to the sheriff.”

Not a single person spoke.

Flush with nervousness, I raised my glass in one sweaty hand. “Hi. I’m sorry we’re meeting this way and sorry for your loss. From all I’ve seen, heard and experienced over the years, Stephen was loved and will be dearly missed.”

Cal leaned against me. “Great,” she whispered, then waved at the

group and announced a round of introductions. “Marcy, my cousin Jazeel and his wife Mina. That bump she’s sporting will be the newest addition to the pack. What’d you say his name is, Jaz?”

“Good try,” the man said, and for my benefit added, “It’s a surprise.”

Jazeel carried himself with a quiet dignity unbelittled by a ketchup-smearred band tee (Aiden’s finger-painting) and a platter full of uncooked burgers. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark skin, a buzzcut and expressive hazel eyes. His wife tossed a patty on the grill. Silver wouldn’t have been my first choice of hair color, but she worked it. Her skin held the faint, creamy translucency of moonlight with a shadowing underneath her blue eyes. She was a waifish woman, dressed in a floral maxi dress. The apron tied over her ensemble accentuated a sizable baby bump.

Maybe my thoughts were driven by her name, but I wondered if she had fangs. I’d never heard of a pregnant vampire, let alone one married to a werewolf and standing in broad daylight.

The moment I set my glass on the patio table and moved to greet them, Mina’s lips thinned to a scowl.

“Congratulations. When’s your due date?” I asked, offering my hand.

“Pack matters don’t concern humans,” she hissed, setting her clean hand on her belly instead of into my palm.

Notwithstanding a fair bit of side eye from his wife, Jazeel welcomed my hand. “End of May.”

The chill of Mina’s stare made me feel as though I was turning my back on an avalanche to greet the other members of Talon pack. From the youngest, a distant teenager who couldn’t bother to take his headphones off to say hello, to the oldest, the mood across the patio was guarded. Last in the line was Cal’s sister-in-law, Evita. Stephen’s wife was a beautiful brunette with particularly striking brown eyes and warm beige skin.

Stephen had met Evita backpacking through Basque Country in northern Spain and learned after a wolfish romp under the moonlight that they both lived on the East Coast.

“Stephen was so excited he called the next day, not to check in, ask how I was or detail the wonders of a seaside metropolis. No, he blurted

without care or concern I'd mercilessly tease him: sis, I've met my wife." Setting her glass beside mine, Cal reached for a tissue box on the table. "Never seen his smile so big as the day he brought Evie home, 'cept at the altar the following November."

Evita collapsed sobbing into her chair. Aiden crawled onto her lap. Passing grill duties to her husband, Mina moved to comfort her. As she passed, she tripped on one of Aiden's toys and hit the ground.

On instinct, closest to her, I grabbed her arm and helped her up.

Mina wrenched herself free with a growl and a hard shove. "How dare you touch me, pelt-thief!"

I stumbled over a chair, but under no circumstances was I about to shove the pregnant werewolf back. "Sorry."

The woman stood around my height but seemed to tower over me. Her fist clenched with a perceptive crack. She was panting, chest heaving, skin glossy. Wet with tears, her eyes took on a wild look. "Suppose you want to steal Evie's dress, too?"

A unified front, the pack crowded closer. Even Evita had risen.

I righted the chair. "I'll have this dry-cleaned. And if I had his pelt I would have handed it over when I gave Cal my grandmother's dolls."

Mina's head snapped around. "She did what?"

"Caught me same as Gen but offered a gift instead of an ass-whooping." Cal slipped between us, all silk and smiles. "Play nice with the sheriff's toy, Mina. We can't be returning her chewed and slobbered. Marcy's a witness, not the enemy." Sorrow lingered in her eyes as she regarded the recent widow. "One of Stephen's killers came for her."

I lifted my dress and made a show of the stitches.

Evita gasped. "Oh, you poor child! All alone to fend off a wolf?"

Point proven, I let the hem swish. "I shot him. Sheriff Harlowe

finished the job.”

Jazeel with Evita clutching his arm leaned forward. “Who was it? Which pack?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

Mina's eyes glowed with sudden delight. “Is this why you brought her to us, Cal? You want me to learn her secrets?”

Cal met Mina, reached out and brushed the woman’s disheveled bangs. “Marcy is our friend, perhaps future packmate.”

Mina recoiled. “Not mine!”

“We could do a lot worse than adding a conservator-restorer to the pack gallery. If you disagree, you’ll be starting your own pack soon, anyway,” Cal continued. “Regardless, you are to treat her with respect. Marcy promised to bring us Stephen's pelt and his attacker's name. In return, we're going to protect her, bring back safety to her home and our neighborhood, then, should the day arrive, welcome her as pack.”

I kept my expression neutral.

A red pearl glistened on the deck beside Mina’s toes. Several more pattered from her clenched fist.

“The baby,” came Jazeel’s worried baritone.

Mina whirled on him.

He lifted his hands in surrender and, while not backing away, made no move to intervene.

Steam hissed through the woman’s fist. “This is bullshit.”

Cal frowned. “Mind your language.”

Mina jabbed a bloody finger my direction. “We don’t know why the

killer was watching her. We don't know why he left Stephen's pelt on her porch. We don't know why Stephen was on her property! Was she providing him some kind of service, were they friends, lovers?" The woman spat a tooth onto the ground. "And you reward her with a position in our family! Stephen's not even in the ground and you've already disgraced our name. Hell, you're so scared of the pain you wouldn't even shift to find him when he was missing! Metacomet is closing in our dominance and you're begging toys off a human."

Closing her eyes, Cal waited what felt like an eternity to reply. "The sheriff believes their encounter was random. I'm inclined to agree."

"Completely," I added. "Outside of the Living Canvas exhibit at Elizabeth Park, we've never exchanged more than a friendly hello."

Mina had eyes only for Cal. "Of everyone in the pack, you're the one the sheriff's leashed?"

The alpha shot her a warning look. "Don't start, Mina."

"She isn't wolf."

"Nor must she be. My parents considered Marcy's grandmother family, thereby extending our protection to her." Cal took Mina's hands and gently wiped the blood with a napkin. "We aren't sisters of flesh and bone but we are sisters. You've lost family, Mina. Imagine if all you had left were a couple of cats?"

That stung.

"I'll treat Marcy like my sister when you treat Stephen like our brother," she hissed, smearing blood across her eyes as she wiped them. "If you were dead and Stephen alive, he'd have burned the fucking capital to get your pelt back, and if the reaper stood in the way, he'd smoke him, too! If you aren't holed up in your room texting delegations to the rest of us, you're cavorting with a human. We don't even have his head! No pelt, no head, Calico! How could you?"

Cal's expression teetered on pleasant annoyance. She fiddled with Mina's hair until the younger girl slapped her away. "Baby turns this far along and you're in for a rough night, hun."

Mina glanced at her feet.

"After everything it's taken to get him here, you and Jaz deserve all the happiness this boy will bring," Cal continued more softly. "You're a smart woman. Rest and relax. Don't complicate a difficult situation."

"Right." Mina swung her head around to address me. "Wouldn't want to get between Sheriff Harlowe and his prey."

"Mina!"

She shrugged. "What? *Sisters* tell each other the truth. She's dog chow."

A nervous grin flashed over Jazeel's face. He pulled his wife into a hug and rocked her a few steps back. When Mina struggled free, Calico took the woman by the arm and led her to the table beside Evita.

"Love or hate her, Marcy has a working relationship with our new sheriff. She mentions your antics and he'll come knocking. God knows we've already given him reason to pry." Cal reached across the table for a water bottle and thumped it hard on an empty place setting in front of Mina. "Were it my head missing, Stephen would cut off his hand before he shoved Marcy. You're risking our family's lives,"—she touched Mina's belly—"old and upcoming. You've fucked up. It's alright. We're grieving. But this afternoon you will sit your ass down and eat a burger while I apologize to Marcy and she and I discuss terms."

The women exchanged stares, then Mina blinked and it was over. She snatched a burger from her husband and plopped beside Evita, who mouthed, 'thank you' to their new alpha.

Over meaningless small talk and several promises on my part that Stephen and I had nothing to do with each other in any capacity, Cal and I prepped new burgers as the last round had been charred to a hockey puck.

After, we returned to the kitchen. She locked the slider and leaned against the counter as I sat alone at the table picking at my hamburger bun. The meat was too rare for my liking, but at the risk of provoking Mina, I decided against asking her to throw it back on the grill.

“The killer’s name, I’m certain I can pry from the sheriff. Stephen’s pelt, however—why not wait for the investigation to conclude?”

Passing me a refilled glass of chardonnay, she turned the chair beside me around to face the patio. “People are capable of great and terrible actions when their lives and livelihood is on the line. Certain choices have put me at odds with Harlowe. I fear he’ll hold my brother hostage out of spite.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Oh, no reason.” She flipped her hand through her hair. “Prior and current to his stint in Connecticut, I may have filed several complaints in an attempt to get him removed from service.”

“Why would you—”

She touched my knee. “Harlowe’s ancestors were the first werewolves. His bloodline is mean enough to someday be the last. ‘Sheriff’ is the human term, Marcy. We of the Otherworld know his kind as reapers. Most of them are vicious, nasty monsters that do a fine job protecting those within their state from other vicious, nasty monsters. But Harlowe, the Society sends on special command. Rumor has it they might make his residence here permanent. I don’t know what he’s after, but I do not want the King of Graves stationed two towns over once he’s killed whatever it is. Whose door will he knock on when bored between hunts?”

“He got smacked around by a single werewolf,” I pointed out. “And was useless after taking a silvered bullet to the shoulder.”

“He’s upset,” she said dismissively. “And his handler will have given him an earful. Don’t expect him to slip again. Everything that’s squared up against him is rotting. You’ll be rotting soon, too, if you don’t run.”

The sheriff had suggested similar. “And if I choose to run with him?”

“No one can, for long.” She sipped her wine. “Ever meet someone and find yourself glad they’ve got a job or hobby to distract them, because if it weren’t for an outlet, they’d be insane?”

“I consider myself one cat short of crazy.”

She smiled. “Sheriffs are paid well for a rough job, but cash isn’t king for that which existed before coins. The Otherworld sees a reaper’s needs

satisfied with certain bonuses, including the handling of invitations.”

“How so?”

“Ask the question, consider the answer—those are the politics nowadays—but the Society allows reapers to override your choice.”

Caelan told me he’d been banned from that part of the job. I wondered if Cal, who clearly had a bone to pick with him, knew that and was attempting to paint him in a bad light. “Is encouraging me to flee part of the game?”

The woman dragged herself from her chair. “Hang on, hun.”

She returned, a pen and fresh glass of wine in hand, with a manilla folder tucked under her arm. She pushed it across the table. I reached out, but she stopped my hand, dark eyes fixed on mine.

“I’m prepared to offer two options,” she explained.

“Go on,” I said slowly.

“For a reaper, Harlowe’s not unnecessarily cruel; Stephen invited him deer hunting whenever he was in the area. I’ve only ever seen him make swift, efficient kills. Problem is, and I’ll admit Harlowe’s right in this one, tiny instance: you need to run. Not a single invitee of his has successfully entered the Otherworld, none that my people have been able to locate, anyway.”

I glanced in the direction of my house. “So I help you, you make me disappear?”

She nodded.

“What if I stay or for some reason am unable to leave?”

“When my brother’s killer has been brought to justice, Harlowe will pop the question in his handsome, husky voice. He’ll have you alone, comfortable and outside everything you’ve ever known.” Her voice lowered. Her hand trailed back and forth across my knee. “It’s gonna be you or him who walks away. That’s how it always goes. That’s how it always is. Unless you’re already a member of the Otherworld. You’d have to be a monster or a dire threat indeed for him to come after a pack member. Harlowe warned you an invitation was coming; you haven’t formally been invited. We could beat him to the bite, so to speak.”

“How so?”

“There’s an alternate process reserved for circumstances such as adoption or marriage, a vetted Society member can request a human be brought into the fold. It’s a tedious interview process and background check,

and reapers make house visits to observe prospects before, during and after the transition, however, the process is primarily overseen by our Health and Safety department. They aren't out to kill anyone; we welcome the genetic diversity and happy society members are less likely to cause issues down the road. I could sponsor you. We've been neighbors nearly our entire lives. I could file the paperwork tonight."

"It's in his notes we're neighbors, not friends," I said, reconsidering another sip of wine. "Besides, someone's probably attempted this stunt before. What makes you think we'd succeed?"

"We may not." She frowned. "But his invitations are usually reserved for humans like you who've been attacked, turned, or witnessed something they shouldn't have, rather than say a werewolf whose kept the secret from her human boyfriend for six years and knows he's about to propose. He doesn't interfere with Health and Safety's recommendations."

"You know a lot about him," I prompted.

"Talon is the largest pack in the state. When you have the network of members we do, encounters with law enforcement become commonplace. It's best to know who you're dealing with. Gannon, our last sheriff, was as crooked a man as they come. Harlowe won't even accept a charitable donation. Worse, he was one of my brother's dearest friends. He convinced Stephen money won't solve our problems." Disgust drew her lips back. "He turned my brother into an activist."

That lined up with Caelan's statements. Nodding, I clasped my hands. "So, how do we make option two a reality?"

Being honest with myself, I hated the idea of running, wasn't sure I could handle starting over a second time. The career change alone would be devastating, but the thought of becoming a werewolf, if I wasn't one already, made me sick. Never in a thousand years would I want to become the monster my grandfather had been. I needed time to breathe and think things through. More importantly, I had to keep as many options on the table as possible until I reached a decision (provided nothing killed me between then and now).

"These are all second, third, and fourth hand observations, Marcy, but he's spending far more time and effort on you than he needs to."

I turned my face under the suspicion that the wine had made my blush more apparent. "No," I said, covering my embarrassed smile. "Really? I mean, to be fair, a killer is after me for reasons as-yet unknown."

Her smile was more worried than happy. “You like him, don’t you?”

“We get along,” I said, picking the seeds off the bun to avoid her knowing gaze. “He’s different than I’m used to.”

“You want different, I’ve got it in spades,” she teased, rubbing her foot against mine. “Set aside your emotions; you make mistakes when emotion gets involved. That being said, he’s keener on you than anyone I’ve dropped in his path. Might just mean he’ll do the honor of killing you himself, reapers get possessive over their prey, but I vote we lean into it.”

The slider opened. Mina walked into the kitchen doing her best to hide a limp from the fall. On her way out, she flipped me the bird. Cal started to rise. I shook my head. The alpha relaxed, but only slightly. Swirling her glass, she settled back, bringing her head close to mine.

“Harlowe is a talented reaper, but he’s more curious than blood hungry. He has urges and instincts and hasn’t chosen to turn off his humanity like his older peers. Take advantage of that. Play his game. Awaken your inner she-wolf.”

I kept quiet, wondering if it were possible for the werewolf gene to lay dormant. Gram had purchased tons of silver earrings for herself and me throughout the years. By chance had I always been wearing silver when my emotions were running high? Or was I simply more human-shaped than most?

Cal’s fingers brushed my chest. I jumped.

“He’s still got a heart,” she continued, grinning something wicked. “Your job is to make it beat. If you can’t . . .” She shrugged. “I’ll name a doll after you.”

Eying the folder, I took a deep breath and let the conversation stall to examine the paperwork. Within, were a set of documents labeled ‘Intention to Bite 102B. Werewolf – Standard’ pre-signed and notarized by Calico and I presumed another pack member. All that was missing was my signature and a valid form of ID.

“We don’t document option one,” she added over my shoulder.

Considering the fact I didn’t know why I was being targeted, I needed the reaper’s and the alpha’s help if I was to have any hope at surviving what was to come. Promising to get back to her quickly with my choice of option, I nonetheless scribbled my name as indicated on the forms as a precaution in

the event I was put under further scrutiny or unable to later.

As she reviewed the signatures, I looked beyond the patio and toward the swaying branches of the orchard. “You know, he did bring me flowers.”

“Ba-bump, ba-bump,” she purred. “Lone wolves are easy prey for a pack, and a good pack puts family first.” Cal frowned at Mina’s back. “To fetch my brother's pelt and keep yours intact, let's strengthen your relationship with the sheriff.”

“I wouldn't call it a relationship.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I sure as hell would. Finish your wine and catnap in one of the spares. We’ve each got busy nights ahead. But first, call the sheriff. You want . . .” She tapped her chin. “Scratch that, *need* to see him. Can you arrange dinner at your place?”

“It’s a disaster over there.”

“And he’ll feel more protective of you because of that,” Cal purred.

Assuming no conversation within a house of wolves was private, I took a walk down Pippin Lane, pausing periodically to search the woods for canine, and human, shadows.

Caelan answered on the second ring.

“Hey,” I began, twining my damp hair around my finger. How did I do this? I'd made it clear I wanted space. “I need to see you.”

“About?”

“Things that go woof in the night,” I said. “Are you free later?”

He was quiet. The background was full of ringing phones and conversation.

“I had lunch with Mrs. Finn. It’s important, Caelan.”

“Okay. What time am I penciling you in for?”

“Be at my house by seven. Bring pizza.”

He closed a door to the office clamor, and with it, changed his tone. “Getting cozy at home, are we? Here I was thinking you’d learned your lesson.”

“We’re having a working dinner, thank you very much. I’ve got a lot on my plate and none of it is food, so by tonight I’ll be near ravenous. Pizza

would be a godsend.”

“What kind?”

“Well, I’m always up for sausage, meatballs, and—”

His voice was an amused rumble. “Oh, you are?”

“Shut up! I’ll text you.” I tapped ‘end call’ about five times, but still wasn't fast enough to cut out his laugh.

chapter 13

WORKING DINNER

“I’m so nervous I might throw up,” I told Lisa, phone in hand and on speaker as I paced the porch. As the clock ticked toward seven, I stopped to watch a spider craft its web between posts. “Did you get my selfie?”

“Not yet. And I never got your texts the other night. Maybe you’ve got a service issue, Marcy.”

The sunset had retained the day’s heat but ever deepening shades of night had softened its strength to a warm radiance. It had been hot enough earlier that I had actually debated whether or not to uncover the air-conditioning unit. Normally, I’d have popped the windows, but, knowing now what the forest contained, I’d opted for the AC.

I rubbed my arms, wishing I’d ironed a sweater. Cal had advised soft, feminine fabrics to draw out Caelan’s protective instincts. I’d chosen the sleeveless cream dress I’d purchased for this year’s Waves in Watercolor summer gala in downtown Mystic: floral lace, a comfortable dressy, with a tapered knee-length hem line and a substantial plunge to give my gals their share of the spotlight. A thin bar necklace dangled between them.

Devin skated wide loops as his mother stood outlined in the glow of their front door yelling for him to come inside. Arm in arm with his grumpy, silver-haired wife, Jaz and Mina passed the teenage skateboarder and rounded the bend near my driveway. Jaz raised his hand. Mina directed her attention toward the street sign where Tammy’s poodle was marking his territory. Ignoring her ignoring me, I waved to Jaz.

Behind me in the hall leaned the plywood barrier. To prevent

mosquitoes, Cal and I had rigged one of those cheap, pet-friendly screens connected by a strip of pull-apart magnets along the center. Later, I'd go full on apocalypse mode and nail the plywood on, then ask the sheriff to walk me out the garage and to the Vilkas household.

Of tonight's available housing choices, none were ideal: room with a pack of upper-class werewolves, endanger Lisa; Wyatt; and the cats, or waste money on a hotel filled with strangers who probably wouldn't rush to save me if I screamed. Reluctant though I was to sleep in Mina's vicinity, Cal's offer seemed most prudent for my short notice stay.

Plus, when Caelan learned of my decision, he might even light a fire under the contractor to finish the work on my house a couple days early.

"Oh! Just got the pic! You are fire tonight, girl! I'm digging the headband; super delicate. New?"

"Borrowed from Stephen's sister, Cal. She invited me over for lunch today to talk about what happened. I'm staying at her place tonight. She's got a spare and needs help setting up for the memorial service."

"Comfier than my couch," Lisa agreed. "Tell Cal I feel awful for her and her fam."

"Will do. I was planning on sending an arrangement. I'll add you to the card."

"Perfect, thanks. Let me know what I owe you." She sighed. "Man, it's scary to think in this day and age someone so well-connected could disappear. Makes you wonder how easy it'd be for us nobodies."

"Yeah," I said with an eye toward the main road. Jaz and Mina had turned for home, subjecting me to the full force of the pregnant werewoman's glare. "How's the apartment hunt?"

"That's tonight's game plan. Hopefully you're offered the apprenticeship soon and we can do some touring together."

Shit. Forgot I hadn't told her. "Fingers crossed. I do have some good

news: the front door's being installed tomorrow, so the cats are one step closer to coming home."

"They're no trouble at all, Marcy. Seriously. I love those fluffy buggers. Wyatt can survive with 'em for weeks if need be. Now, before you go, tell me you snapped a skimpier selfie for our sheriff?"

"Lisa!" I chided, fidgeting with my neckline. "I'd never!"

According to a certain alpha werewolf, that was exactly the action I should be taking if I wanted to cement a bond with Caelan, but there was only so much abject humiliation I could suffer in a single day.

Lisa snorted. "Please. You didn't even come home last night."

"We. Just. Talked."

"Yeah, nonstop since you met. He'd love it."

"What if he didn't?"

"I'm an excellent judge of character, Marcy. He's the classic 'Work Hard, Play Harder' type. Absolutely he would, bet he'd even reciprocate your kindness. Don't stand there with a straight face and tell me you wouldn't appreciate a sneak peek."

"He'll be here any minute," I said, thoroughly regretting my last 'peek.' It'd be a while before the sound and feel of flesh squishing between my toes faded into distant memory.

"Next time," Lisa replied.

"If there is a next time," I muttered, confident but increasingly anxious in my ability to remain on both Calico's and Caelan's good sides. Figuring out what the hell to do when I didn't know who to trust or what was happening made my overwhelmed heart race as though I'd been shoved back beneath the bed as Grandpa's nails dug into Rhetta's thigh.

Shuddering, I flipped the scar on my palm against the clawed railing.

I wasn't going to panic. Finger by finger I would relax my death grip on the railing to the count of ten and—

Headlights turned up our road. I felt overprepared, underprepared, and frazzled, so much so that when I jumped and swore Lisa was ready to call, well, the sheriff. I almost darted inside before realizing he'd have seen me hanging off the porch so I may as well linger and pretend to be a cool, relaxed young lady taking in spring's twilight.

“Gotta go. Give Samson and Igor all the snuggles. Love you, thank you, talk to you later.”

The sheriff's truck pulled behind my car. As the man retrieved pizza from the passenger seat, for some reason all I could think was I wished I was tanner. I'd been wintering in long sleeves.

I should've ironed a goddamn sweater.

“Evening, sheriff,” I said, masking my pasty goosebumps against the rail.

“Miss Davins.” Caelan stopped at the base of the stairs and gave me a brief once-over. “You make that dress real pretty.”

“Thank you.”

I'd checked the mirror a hundred times. I knew I looked a fox tonight like I knew to play coy, innocent and flattered to drop his hackles. But when Caelan complimented my dress, my smile was genuine and my veins were flooded with a rush of stupid, giddy adrenaline.

He joined me on the porch. Whereas I'd overdone my wardrobe, his was relaxed. Jeans, dress shirt untucked, sleeves rolled past the serpentine tattoo. Overall comfortable attire; though after my current run of luck, I'd bet good money this was a concealed carry outing.

When he was close, he tapped the cardboard box and asked, “You're fixin' to eat pizza wearing that?”

I snapped apart the magnets and held a flimsy panel open. “I’m certainly not eating it naked.”

He ducked through. I caught a whiff of cologne, woody and sharp. “Should you change your mind, I might could be convinced to sit still a while instead of rushing off to tend to an unexpected basement flood.”

“Oh, yeah? What time was the pipe bursting?”

“Depends on what you do, Marcy.” He elbowed me and grinned. “Reckon my imaginary housemate will call about eight. I bumped an interview to nine this evening.”

The magnets crinkled together behind us. With some teasing about a certain bad date, he helped set the plywood in place for the night, then it was off to the kitchen.

My kitchen table had a strategic mess sprawled across it. I’d pulled every folder Gram had left in her filing cabinet, all the paperwork and documents she hadn’t destroyed or couldn’t. It’d been years since I’d rifled through them in search of death certificates. I hadn’t paid attention to the records since. School and work were taxing, Gram was dying, and the majority were forgeries related to our Connecticut lives.

Left in the kitchen were documents of no particular danger to prying eyes. However, in a manila envelope she must’ve inserted prior to our final journey to the hospital, there were a few additional, as yet unstudied documents. Until I could examine them, I stashed those in the dining room hutch underneath table cloths which hadn’t experienced a holiday party in years.

Catching sight of the tabletop disaster, the sheriff slowed and set the pizza on the counter. “Mining for silver?”

“My grandmother kept a revolver loaded for werewolves. What other secrets has she buried?” Like a Nazi ring and perhaps the reason I wasn’t exhibiting werewolf tendencies. “Feel free to grab a shovel—not from my shed, please.”

He picked up car insurance papers as I rummaged through a bottom cabinet for paper plates. “You sure you want me digging?”

“This is a working dinner,” I reminded him. “Besides, haven’t you already started?”

He smiled. “Indeed, Miss Davins. What’ve you learned?”

“So far I’ve found an incorrect spelling of her maiden name on immigration paperwork, but nothing supernatural. Excluding her doll collection, of course, but if they’re related to this mess, I’m lacking the ability to—”

“I’ve read the reports. There were no Otherworld sellers involved. The only confiscated doll in the collection had human remains. Whatever stories came with the dolls were just that. I’ve wondered if you might be targeted based on your grandmother’s apparent pack connection rather than as a random witness. Cast a few lines, but no bites yet.” He paused as if allowing me a chance to nibble. “Mrs. Finn told me your grandmother maintained an ongoing relationship with Talon in some capacity. Evidently your involvement was to be kept to an absolute minimum, which they honored.”

“Interesting,” I said. “And did Mrs. Finn inform you that my Gram had an ongoing relationship with her mother?”

He glanced over, eyebrows raised.

I dropped the plates on the counter. “They kept it secret, what with the times, marital status, and their age difference.”

“Were you aware?”

I shrugged. “I knew they were members of the same gardening club. Never crossed my mind, to be honest.”

The man pulled out a chair and waved me into it. He waited for me to sit before adding, “Here’s where I’m lost, Marcy. Your grandmother was under observation by New York’s former sheriff, Darrell Tolbert.”

All these years I’d believed we had escaped detection. “For what?” I asked, trying to figure out what he knew without giving the game away.

“Tolbert made several visits to this area which ceased around the date

of your grandmother's death. He kept a journal, the contents of which were uploaded last year to our digital archives. I found it running both your name and your grandmother's through our database. Requested the hard copy and other files. Tolbert had her name, a clipping of the obituary, and several undated pictures." He scratched the back of his head, his face a touch pink. "One of which is quite the vintage pinup. I wasn't expecting that."

"No shit."

"I've chalked their connection as personal in some regard, but can't figure or find why. No cases involving her, no logged calls or official reports to this residence by Tolbert or Gannon, Connecticut's sheriff before me. Just her name and a handful of dates mentioned in his journal beginning a few months after your grandmother purchased this house."

"And where are Tolbert and Gannon now?"

"Retired," was his claim, but there was no defense of it in his expression.

"Natural causes?"

"Don't get more natural than fangs," he said. "New York's current sheriff never bothered investigating Tolbert's private affairs. Worse storms brewing."

"Where was I named?"

"In the 'survived by.'" He sneezed, looked abruptly alert and asked with a frown toward the darkness beneath the table, "Where are my least favorite hellions?"

"Harassing Lisa and Wyatt. Once the new drywall and window are installed, I'll bring them home."

On that note (and upon his refusal to take a twenty from me to cover the cost), it was time to eat.

I pressed extra napkins against my slice lest I grease one of my pricier dresses. "Shall we?" I asked, gesturing to my vacuumed, un-mauled living

room furniture.

He glanced from table to couch. “We could’ve gone somewhere. Have you gotten any rest?”

“Hard to do, what with visions of Cho oozing through my head.” I flipped on the table lamps. At the TV remote I hesitated, but left it untouched. We were getting on fine without distractions. “How do you cope?”

“It’s all I’ve ever known.” He sank onto one side of the couch. “What’s this wolf business then?”

Dress-conscious, I sat on the other side, balanced my plate on the arm rest and leaned for a dainty bite. “After the contractor left, I took a trot to Calico’s.”

“What’d she want?”

“To be honest,”—the best liars mostly were—“I’m not sure. More than Stephen’s pelt. Shouldn’t have gone alone.”

“No.”

“Were you trying to get ahead of her with the snake in the daisies?”

“Mrs. Finn enjoys testing the limits of my patience.” Caelan’s natural state of calm kept his reaction tempered. “There’s no telling what a person will do when confronted with life-altering information. If she got you spooked, things might’ve ended badly for you both. Not to mention the wasted time and resources spent tracking you while there’s actual monsters to hunt.”

“Would you have told me if Cal hadn’t broken in?”

“I’d have preferred letting you sip from a cup than a firehouse, but yes, I would have. However, cat’s out. You decide what to believe and how to proceed. Just know I aim to keep you safe.”

“According to Cal, you aim to isolate me from friends and family.”

“A regrettable precaution. By ensuring human and werewolf safety, I keep my casualty and invitation rates low.”

“Low because your buddies kill them?”

“Paid my dues several times over for keeping my flock safe from wolves and monsters alike.” He took a guiltless bite. “Thing is, ignore the rules long enough and most folks quit applying them to you.”

I bit my lip, unsure if now was the moment, if ever, to bring up my grandfather. “The New York sheriff, Tolbert, could he have invited my grandmother or made an arrangement to keep her safe? Talon considers her family.” She’d been calling a cop in her final months; maybe it’d been Tolbert.

“He wasn’t the type.” Caelan got up for another slice. “His notes on her are borderline obsessive. Then there’s you, Marcy, raised by a grandmother totin’ silvered bullets. How did your parents die?”

“I’m sure you’ve checked.”

“I ain’t asking what’s on record for a couple of cardboard cutouts.”

His attention was diligent and focused. Unused to challenge, I composed myself and met his eyes.

“Whatever my family history is, I haven’t done any wrong. I was young; I was sheltered, and I don’t enjoy standing at the center of a narrowing ring of werewolves. It’s frightening, how little I know.”

“I imagine so,” he said softly. “I’m sorry.”

Glancing at the remaining half slice on my plate, I changed gears. “Cal flipped me a cold burger this afternoon. Is meat so raw it’s mooing standard among werewolves? Because from my observations, you sure don’t have any qualms with tonight’s selection.”

“Raw meat is an acquired taste on the human tongue. As wolves, we

enjoy food hot, fresh and filled with marrow, but we aren't immune to worms and other parasites.”

I cringed. “Can we steer the conversation toward something less infectious?”

“You mean like the bite of a werewolf?” He winked. “The transformation rips parasites out. Depending on the critter, might take several cycles to clear.” But he did change the subject to lighter nonsense for the rest of dinner (which consisted of him eating half a pizza and me nibbling through the one slice). We trashed our plates; I offered him a drink, both of us stuck to water, then we retreated to the comfort of my couch.

This is it, I thought, sitting on the middle cushion. *This is when I make my move*. I crossed my legs and smoothed the dress over my knee. Please the alpha, gain the reaper’s trust. Embarrass myself in the process. Simple.

The sheriff reclined into his corner and stretched his arm along the back of the couch. His gaze, warm and curious, returned to mine. “Why a new shovel?”

Glancing over his shoulder to a picture on the wall of Lisa and Wyatt at their college graduation, I tapped my knee. “Hydrangeas,” I decided.

He rubbed the side of his face, recently shaved, I noted. “Hydrangeas?”

“My porch has been put through the ringer; blood’s feeding my weeds and future irises. So yeah, hydrangeas. I’ll show you my ideas.”

Before he could prove me wrong, and to make him regret questioning me, I jumped to retrieve my cell. Phone in hand, I plopped beside him close enough where my leg brushed his. He politely endured my touch and subsequent Google search.

“Thoughts?” I asked after some aimless scrolling and narration through the images.

“Blue.”

I squinted at the flowers. “Heavenly or electric?”

After checking his pocket watch, he started to stand. “Well, if you’re set, I do believe the water’s rising.”

My “No!” came out too quick. I stretched for his hand, dropped mine the instant I realized my mistake and patted the couch. “There’s more. Come sit.”

He shot me a questioning look, but I didn’t wilt: I waited, thanking my lucky stars when his keys returned to his pocket.

“So I was wondering,” I began, not sure where to put my hands all of a sudden. I touched my chin, then my headband, and settled for grasping my knee in the style of a posh reporter. “What causes the transformation? On TV you always see a full moon.”

“Night is the safest stretch to roam. Humans see better under a full moon. It’s a correlation, same as ice cream and drowning. A full moon doesn’t cause a shift.”

“So what does?”

He sat at the far end. “Anger, fear, excitement, arousal; any strong emotion could, but once a Were develops control, they shift at will.”

Our conversation chugged along smooth as a documentary. With the subtlety of a moose on ice, I closed the distance between us half an inch at a time, remembering how Keith ran me over this same side.

“Why is it this,” —with a finger I slid back the lace to show off my stitched thigh—“can’t cause a person to turn, but a bite can?”

His gaze dropped then immediately sought higher refuge on the fireplace mantle, but the man allowed me into his space without complaint. “Certain components need to enter the bloodstream. Short of slobbery paws, the bite is far more effective.”

Spit and stitches made not for titillating conversation, however, Calico had given me instructions. I was curious about their effectiveness and committed to my own plan of earning both their trust, so red-faced I laid my hand flat on Caelan’s cheek.

He turned into my touch, face warm against my palm, and regarded me with an inquisitive patience.

My tongue stuck to my mouth. With sputtering grace I murmured, “Can you turn someone with a kiss?”

Without breaking eye contact, he returned my hand to my knee. I felt relieved yet disappointed, only to flinch at the surprise of him sweeping my hair back, exposing the vulnerable crook between shoulder and neck.

“Miss Davins?” His eyes were bright and his tone low like the hand now on my hip, drawing me close.

My heart skipped. “Marcy,” I purred, knowing full well it didn't roll off the tongue as easy as an 'Isabella' or 'Sasha.'

His lips brushed my throat in a soft chuckle and then, shaking with laughter, he rested his forehead against my shoulder. “Are you trying to seduce me?”

“Trying?” I shoved him away and scooted back an entire cushion. “I was!”

“Why the hell—” he needed a deep breath to stem the laughs; even that failed to knock his wolfish grin. “Why the hell would you come at me like an actress in a bad porno?”

“Cal,” I pleaded, fanning through several dark shades of crimson.

“Straight out of her playbook,” he muttered. “And you hopped along to her harebrained scheme?” He added a pair of bunny ears for emphasis.

“I'll be back in my home soon. Her protection for the pelt seems fair.” Agreeing to her tactics didn't make them any less mortifying.

“Well,” he said, wiping the corner of his eye. “Please inform Mrs. Finn our relationship is strictly business.”

“Will do.” I wrung the hem of my skirt. Whatever blush I'd fanned away roared back. “I'm aware of the optics, but would you consider pretending for a spell? I'd rather not make enemies with a house of werewolves. God knows they're watching.”

The spotlight glowed warm on the quiet yard. While I didn't twist

around and give away our conversation, it was easy to imagine a forest filled with yellow eyes and pricked ears.

The smile on Caelan's face faded the longer his focus kept outside. He dropped his arm back along the couch, gestured for me to return. "You best be moving on closer." Once I'd settled against him, his hand rested easy on my shoulder. "You alright?" he asked, studying my expression. "I've some experience scattering vultures."

"Fine." I allowed myself a moment of cooldown. "I'm under pack protection at least until I convince you to surrender Stephen's pelt."

"Stephen's pelt is with forensics. Mrs. Finn can throw you after me, but I'm not breaking protocol for a kiss from a beautiful woman. My team won't, either; well, Jorge might but he can't swipe my yogurt without breaking a sweat. Jali would sniff him out before he reached the end of the hall."

"Think Cal's sore she can't steal it?" I asked. "Following pack logic, she picked me because if I go down, her pack won't."

"You know about her?"

I straightened all proud. "Told you, sheriff, I've an eye for art. There's a good twenty million on her walls. Haven't determined who she is, yet, but I know which museums would love to have a word."

"May I save you a search?"

"By all means."

"Calico Finn is every bit as famous as her brother, but where he gave, she takes. She's known as the Koi. Leaves a hand-painted figurine as a calling card."

Forgetting myself, I turned into him. His grip on my shoulder tightened then quickly fell away. "No way. The pieces are in high demand themselves. Unobtainable unless you have something stolen. Priceless in their

own sense.” And full of meaning to the creator. There had been speculation in the art community as to what this artist was saying. I almost wished they had her voice to accompany the pieces. I wondered if Cal sculpted the array of koi-patterned animals herself, or if they originated from someone within the pack. “Must admit, I hate what she does but admire her for being able to create a market for her ‘stolen’ art.”

From Caelan’s reluctant nod, admiration wasn’t his choice of adjective.

Feeling experimental, I ran two fingers underneath my necklace chain and readjusted the pendent between my breasts. When my hand moved so did he: a half inch away with his attention returned on the mantle.

“Cal felt my best course of action was kissing you, among other activities. Why’s that, Caelan?” I asked with an innocuous smile.

He cleared his throat. “Reckon she saw or heard something in the manner in which you and I have interacted and reasoned to apply her experience to your situation.”

“What kind of something?” I prodded, sort of maybe hoping for an admission.

“Ain’t my job to interpret tea leaves, Miss Davins.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

“You’re hard to resist when you’re just being yourself, but...” The sheriff put his palm on my face and gently pushed me to the side. “I’m allergic to cats.”

“And feelings, evidently,” I hissed in good humor, smoothing my hair as he stood. “So you’re aware, I’m of a similar mindset.”

His hand, reaching for his keys, froze. “Oh?”

“I’m not a dog person.”

He waved me off and headed for the hall. “Not a dog, Miss Davins.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You shed worse than one.”

Caelan turned, hand-on-hip. “We're going there?”

I shrugged one shoulder.

“You look like a raccoon with those bags under your eyes. Did you sleep at all last night, or were you up digging holes for your 'hydrangeas?’”

“What or where I dig on my property is none of your business,” I huffed, crossing my arms.

“Keeping you alive is my business,” he said. “Mighty difficult to accomplish when you’ve painted yourself red and thrown yourself headlong at the bull.”

I stood, the fear, anger and confusion of the past few days catching up to me. “Excuse me for not allowing my life to be trampled. This is my home, Caelan. I work my ass off to make enough money to pay my loans, feed the cats and keep this house, not spotless, but functional. And you’re telling me I have to run away from my accomplishments, my friends, my entire life, become a fucking monster, or die?”

He came to the end of the coffee table, watching me but studying the room’s contents. “Take this to mean you’re staying.”

“Here and *human*,” I snapped.

He froze. “That’s not an option, Marcy.”

“Yes, it is. You just don’t like the result.”

“Why would you—”

“How can you work for such evil?” I asked. “I can keep Society secrets without changing who I am. I shouldn’t be forced to become one of those, those *monsters*.”

“Werewolves?” he said softly.

I realized what I’d said. “They aren’t all bad,” I continued, flopping

down on the part of the couch furthest from the windows. “I know that, but I can’t be one, Caelan. I can’t. The very thought...”

He toyed with keys, glancing from the door to me, then sat beside me. “I wish things were different but you’ve found teeth in the dark and there are hours yet to dawn. I’m trying to change them, Miss Davins, I am, but change won’t come in time for you. Best I can do is lead you somewhere safe.”

I turned my head away. “Or you’re trying to trick a gullible sheep.” “Don’t recall you uttering a single ‘baa.’” At my headshake, he bumped his shoulder against mine and added, “Someone who throws up her hands saying, ‘Fuck it, let’s start over, sheriff’ and asks me to lie to a guy is hardly sheepish.”

Flipping my hands over in my lap, I rubbed the scarred palm. “It’s not that I don’t want to leave . . . I can’t. I delayed moving out because of Gram needing help around the house. She’s gone two years now. I’ve applied for nine apprenticeships since and lost them all. I’ve spent my entire life doing what I’m supposed to and being great at it, but someone’s always better. I’m tired of failing but at the same time, I know I’m close. I’m too specialized and in love with my work to start fresh.”

“The life you had died in the woods with Stephen, but you can keep some elements. Turning doesn’t get you fired.” He paused. “Might get you hired, actually.”

“I can’t be a werewolf,” I continued. “The more I think about it, the more certain I am. Why can’t the Otherworld accept me as I am?”

“Give it time,” he said, patting my knee. “Talk to Mrs. Finn. It ain’t so bad.”

“I’m happy as a human. I’m happy being me.”

His sigh was about as large as mine. “You’ll be killed.”

“Okay.”

Confusion knit his brow. He leaned away. “Okay? Marcy—”

“Life’s more than having a heartbeat, Caelan. I’ll fight for what I’ve created here.”

He frowned. "Mighty grim future ahead."

"Says the reaper." I crossed my arms. "At least I can plan for you. My family never stood a chance."

"What happened to them?"

"A werewolf." My mouth snapped shut. A sense of finality washed over me. I didn't mean to cry but I couldn't stop, either. Sharing the truth made me realize how terribly lonely the secret had made me over the years.

Caelan rubbed my knee, stayed with me a few minutes before excusing himself to retrieve tissues from the bathroom.

"I'm sure you've spent nights and days wishing they were alive and not a memory," he said upon returning. "Trust that they're happy you survived, Marcy. You're a survivor. Death isn't what they want for you. If it was, you may already have met me, or more likely one of my predecessors."

"I'm not changing my mind." I dabbed at my eyes, glad I'd opted for the waterproof mascara. "Still gonna do everything in your power to protect the walking dead?"

"Begging your pardon, Miss Davins, but I will convince you to run. Until then and failing that, I'll do what I can to keep you human." He stood with a faint smile. "Nevertheless, I am mighty sorry for ruffling your feathers. How can I make it up to you?"

I set the tissues aside. "If you'd asked me three glasses deep, I'd have declared I want to unlock my wild side, to experience unbridled passion and marvelous adventure, something, anything, different than work all day, go to bed tired and wake up the same."

"You got that." He paused. "Somewhat."

I scrunched the nearest throw pillow. "Yeah, well, turns out I can live without the marvels and by extension I can cross 'adventure' off the bucket list, too. Missing a wild roll in the hay, but you're the only person I know

worth sending a naked picture to, so that's out. Not that I ever would. Definitely won't, don't you worry."

He opened his mouth, closed it, then settled on, "All I want is to keep you alive. You, however, seem determined to become monster bait."

"I'm a victim. Either I die by a murderer's claws or the wolves you run with."

He paced the length of my coffee table. "Why aren't you more afraid?"

"I'm terrified," I admitted. "But I was raised beside a pack of werewolves and not until the past few days have I considered them anything other than decent neighbors. I'm scared of monsters, Caelan, not people or werewolves or death. If you want to scare me into running, try harder."

"Well, alright," he said with a crooked smile and open hand. "Move on in, Miss Davins."

Pulse hammering, unsure which of us would regret tonight more, I set my hand in his like a singed moth returning to the flame.

Caelan pulled me up and against his body, held my waist to keep me balanced and at that delicate curve of contact and in the roughness of his palm I felt a shift toward chaos, as if the first iron coil had broken from Fenrir's chainlinked paw. I lost my voice. His grip tightened, anchored in a reality I was still coming to understand. Amber eyes found mine.

Quick as he came on, the wolf retreated. "Shit," Caelan said, glancing away. "Sorry."

I took confused step after him. "What?"

He started laughing. "'Can you turn someone with a kiss!' My God, Marcy, that really tickled me."

"Wow," I said, grateful for the break in tension. "And I almost spilled my guts to you."

“Night’s still young and my ears are perked.”

“You’ve got places to be.”

“As do you.” Cracking his knuckles, he nodded to the hall. “Please, Miss Davins, will you run on and fetch your coat? Fine a night as this, I can walk you under the starlight to Mrs. Finn’s porch, but I’m hoping you’d fancy a drive to Avon. You can sit in on an interview.”

As the temperature in the room cooled, I rubbed my arms. “Why the change of heart?”

“It’s when you’ve got your back turned kids cause the worst trouble.”

I frowned. “I’m old enough to vote, remember?”

“Quite some years past ‘old enough,’ Miss Davins.” Grinning, he dodged my incoming pillow and headed into the hall for his shoes. When I’d scampered past, stretching for my tan spring jacket on the hook, he caught my wrist. “Remember, Marcy, strictly business. I’m not driving us to a quiet spot for some canoodling or anything else you think you want or need from me.”

“You’re the one inventing a time and a place, sheriff.” I didn’t need the cracked hall mirror to tell me my cheeks had bloomed carnation red. I brushed his hand aside and pulled on my coat. “While you’re imagining, care to detail my wants and needs?”

“Tempted,” he drawled, picking a strand of coarse fur off my shoulder, “But I don’t draw lines to cross ‘em.”

“Bullshit.”

His smile was difficult to read. “Here’s my offer, Marcy. You want to throw yourself into the monster’s maw? Fine. Work the case as my first human partner. Set an example for our backwoods department. I’ll have an easier time keeping you alive at my side; and what you encounter, should you survive, might could convince you to leave. But the job’s a lot of who peed on whose lawn.”

“I have a job.” Maybe.

He seemed prepared to restart our argument but caught himself. “Tonight. Come for a ride along.”

I hesitated.

“Life’s fleeting,” he replied, offering his arm. “And we should be fleeing to somewhere there’s more of it. What do you say, Marcy? Will you join my hunt?”

I bobbed into a curtsy. “You aren’t particularly frightening, by the way.”

A grim, pleasant smile set his amber eyes twinkling. “Anticipation’s half the fun, ain’t it?”

I pulled my hair into a pony tail and adjusted the headband in the mirror. Grey below the eyes but still smoking. “So we’re off to see which werewolves?”

“Metacomet, rival of Talon’s. The wolf who killed Cho was linked to a burglary a few months prior. Despite his killer having no known affiliate pack, Metacomet had accused and still blames Mrs. Finn.”

“What was stolen?”

“Per the report: petty cash, a television, and jewelry; off report: a map pertaining to a potential archeological dig in Brazil. The homeowner is an associate professor of anthropology at Yale. He graciously agreed to move our meeting to this evening. Your grandmother was an arts and antiques investigator. Maybe there’s a connection between her world and his.”

I stopped walking, then with an apology eased inside the kitchen. “Hang on.”

He tilted his head. “What are you doing?”

“Being Marcy.” I snatched the pizza box off the counter and held it, instead of him, on the walk to his truck. “I’m so goddamn hungry.”

chapter 14

STAG HILL

By the time I was wiping my fingers on napkins fresh from the glove compartment, we'd driven across the covered bridge leading to one of the more reclusive and exclusive gated communities in the state. The landmark, headed by lanterns and curling ivy, marked Metacomet's reign over the nearby hills and mountains.

According to Caelan, Metacomet had formed after a group of packs banded together to establish several Were-safe territories in northern and central Connecticut. Talon, which had the size and wealth to act as it pleased and often sided with smaller, 'unclaimed' families and individual Werefolk, had long since proved the stubborn thorn. For decades the packs had sparred over a swath of woodland with a high deer population and low human traffic somewhere northwest of tonight's visit.

Avon was a wealthy town. Schools were excellent, average income high, and the remote Stag Hill community, a 'home for the hart' furthered the refined impression.

Oak, elm, and pine made for a picturesque forest around the community's gates. Tan brick barred access to mowed lawns and ornamental shrubs of the gorgeous, if not almost identical, craftsman homes contained within. Two gates stood alongside one another. The first lead to a speaker system. Across a divider lined with spot-lit rows of drooping daffodils and tulips, the second marked the exit.

The sheriff rolled down his window and pressed the intercom. He mentioned who we were, why we'd come, then let his arm hang, waiting for someone to buzz us through.

Static.

He asked again, had me scan the gatehouse for a security guard.

Static.

“Broken?” I suggested, laying the pizza box on the back seat.

Caelan got out to examine the gate and promptly swung it open with an easy push. I met his eyes across the windshield. Gone was the cheer from the man who’d serenaded me with off-tune Carrie Underwood ballads during the ride over.

A lump formed in my throat as he asked me to slide on over to the driver’s side.

Waving me through the gate, he had me pull the truck to one side of a bubbling fountain, where a bronze stag had been erected as if to oversee the community. Homes stood in various states of occupation as expected for early evening- cars parked, newspapers and packages tucked away on porches, garbage cans rolled to bottoms of driveways, lights on and televisions flickering in kitchens and family rooms.

Caelan indicated a car in front of the nearest home. A sprinkler buzzed water against the lawn, the sidewalk, and directly into the open passenger door.

“Glad I wore flats,” I murmured as he helped me onto the pavement.

We stood in open air, but the gates and brick brought on a sense of confinement. Whip-poor-wills hissed from the forest beyond the wall. The steady tcht-tcht-tcht of the sprinkler made the lone mechanical noise.

“How many people live here?”

“Eighty families or thereabouts.” He retrieved a semi-automatic pistol from a lock box under the back seat. “Not a scythe, but effective. I’m going to walk you through the basics, then it’s your responsibility.”

I glanced from the weapon to his stony expression. “My dress pocket holds about a pack of gum.”

“I’ll show you the safety. After, you can choose to wait in the truck or follow.”

I balked, but listened, watched, and demonstrated. Having exposure to firearms helped establish a comfort level even if Gram hadn’t meant to educate me.

“Werewolf aren't impervious to injury, but we heal quick. It’s difficult to take down a shifted Were of any variety. Catastrophic damage that kills faster than they can recover is the goal. Depending on your understanding of their anatomy, the heart may not be an easy target. Plenty of vital organs to damage in the torso, however. That being said, and I don’t recommend someone with your aim try unless you can’t miss, kill the brain, stop the body.”

Gram had caught Gramps in the back of the skull.

I accepted the weapon, taking care to place my finger outside the trigger guard.

“Forgot to check if there’s a round ready,” he said. “Doesn’t matter you saw me do it.”

“Sorry,” I said, embarrassed.

“It’s alright.” He clasped my shoulder. His gun remained holstered at his hip. “Remember, this is your last line of defense. Shoot if you mean to kill. Some of these werewolves are assholes, but they're civilized assholes.”

He raised a finger, turned his back to me to listen. Uncertain what to do, I turned mine to him and, with a grip that shook less the longer I held the gun, listened.

Sprinklers, fountains, Whip-poor-wills, wind—

If darkness slunk around the corner how would I react? If golden eyes

lit the shadows beyond the lamppost was I prepared to face the inevitable teeth? I told myself I could handle this, that Caelan had every intention of keeping me safe and enough confidence in my mental state to trust I'd handle the weapon responsibly.

Unless Calico was right, and he was letting me loose because he didn't mind my getting caught in the crossfire. Accidental death would absolve him of his duties, wouldn't it?

Footsteps.

I'd been so absorbed I hadn't noticed the sheriff head toward a front door. At once I felt exposed and hurried after.

"Not a howl in the hills," he said when I'd drawn close.

"That a thing?"

"Might could be, if you and the partner you'd been sexting were feeling springy." Pressing the doorbell, he leaned against the siding with a coy smile. "Tell me, Miss Davins, did nudes hit your bucket list because you haven't but want to, or because you want one more go before cheating yourself out of a shiny new life?"

Heat rushed into my cheeks. "I've done nudes, in nonsexual context."

He rang again. "You being creatively inclined, I'll wager you were an art model?"

"Bodypainting gigs and drawing classes in college. Helped cover rent."

In a flurry of wingbeats, a pair of cardinals abandoned a nearby shrub. I froze; Caelan pushed himself from his post.

"Which door next, deputy?"

We tried multiple homes: looked in windows, jiggled handles, tested a few garages. Not a soul emerged to greet or scream at us. After the search for a cell signal forced us to walk back beyond the gates, we learned not a single Metacomet pack member had requested assistance from the CPA or local station in the past twenty-four hours. Not unusual, but given the silence of the

community, troubling. Caelan requested backup.

Help, however, would arrive slowly. According to Lieutenant Mishra-Anderson, while we had been signal searching, Jaz reported a body. On Calico's orders, he and a few pack mates had headed to the slaughterhouse to search for clues pertaining to Stephen's death, to instead discover a headless woman hanging from rusted hooks.

Not Lisa, Caelan assured me.

Upon failing to reach the associate professor, Mr. Dhruv Kulkarni, who lived near the community gardens further in, the sheriff turned for the truck. His eyes gleamed as we passed in and out of streetlights.

"Watch my back," he instructed as we returned, tossing me first the keys then his coat.

"Thought you could handle yourself?"

"Trust you more today than yesterday." With a smile he pulled off his shirt. "Also, rear left tire is slashed."

Frowning, I shoved the keys in my dress pocket and draped his coat over my arm. "Do you have to?"

"Until we find someone, everyone is missing." He wiggled his nose. "And this handsome asset of mine receives a serious upgrade."

At my apprehensive agreement he stopped, looked from the gun in my hand to his coat in the other. His eyes, warm amber, had lost their humanity.

"I won't hurt you, Marcy."

"No, you're saving me for later."

His laughter strained into a growl.

I waited until he'd undressed in full to snatch the rest of his clothes

and toss them in the backseat. Having seen enough last time, I turned toward the flickering dance of the fountain and the glimmer of stars over the hills to thus limit his shift to the sound of wet cracks and scraping claws.

The sprinkler's steady tcht-tcht-tcht sputtered into a frenzy. I spun and there he was, a huge wolf of mottled blacks and greys, chasing the sprinkler's path until his pelt was soaked. Remnants of the shift dribbled in dilute, pink pearls down his lighter throat and belly. His head swung around to nip a patch of gore, then with a wag of his tail he was off in a series of bloody skips and leaps, shaking the worst free.

“Caelan?”

He bounced to a halt, ears curved forward, eyes bright above a lupine grin. The stream of water caught him across the snout. I laughed. He snapped after it, then the wolf dropped his unnerving gaze to mine and approached. He could've rested his chin on my head, he stood so tall.

Despite his demeanor and promise, my body tensed in primal apprehension. My finger hovered against the gun's safety. Shooting hand lowered but ready, I offered the back of my free hand.

His chest puffed. I tensed, fingertips inches from the flat of his snout.

The wolf squared his shoulders and shook. Water splattered everywhere.

“Thanks for that,” I muttered, wiping my cheek and neck. Would've complained about the dress, but my impromptu pizza feast had already ruined it.

Caelan broke into a sloppy grin, then his dark nose bobbed to the prevailing wind.

Humanity had fled the sheriff's bones; this was no corrupted blend of man and wolf, no cross contamination of genes to stretch his limbs to unnatural proportion or length. He was pure animal, except, perhaps, in mannerism. The creature in his state of prime alertness was both natural and taboo, as if Mother Nature had unearthed a cache of tarry wonders and breathed fresh life into blackened bones.

His coat was short and dense, his ears smaller and more rounded than the typical grey wolf's. He seemed muscular—maybe the wrong word, but I didn't have many for wolves—built thick with sturdy legs and massive,

flexible paws, all the better to support a broad head and blunt muzzle faintly reminiscent of a jaguar's powerful jawline.

The smallest smile crossed my face at the thought of sharing my observation with him later.

Caelan flicked an ear back, regarded me over his shoulder through one unreadable eclipse of an eye, then took off at an easy, loping run. Easy for him: I struggled to find a pace that'd let me keep up and keep my flats. Gaining speed, he crossed an empty intersection, headed past a community garden and darkened tennis courts.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd run this hard.

I was winded, clutching my side (and thinking a wolf of his proportions had to be able to support a human on his back, asshole) when my foot slid through a puddle. I fell. My elbow hit the concrete, sending the gun clattering across the sidewalk.

Caelan had been more aware of my lagging than I gave him credit for; he was already circling back by the time I'd pushed myself up on stinging hands and knees and regained possession of the gun.

A flash of red caught my eye. Blood splattered my foot and ankle. Might've screamed at the sheer volume if I had any air left, until I realized it wasn't mine.

The sheriff walked into the puddle, belly sprayed pink, paws dripping. He angled his head.

"Fine," I panted.

He moved his shoulder against me. Glad for his stability, aware that on a night darker than mine Gram had once accepted a monstrous shoulder to lean on, I rested against the werewolf and let the night air steady my lungs.

We'd run through blood for a good quarter-mile. I'd been so focused on pushing my legs through the pain I hadn't noticed more than the flat sheen of puddles, hadn't considered the possibility anything but sprinklers or a passing shower had created them.

The lights went out and the visuals worsened in a northerly direction. Shattered glass. Porch rockers upturned. Cars dented and clawed. Tumbleweeds of hair and fur drifting the avenues. Splats of crimson underfoot, across the road, against homes, cars, flower beds, and the occasional child's bike. Scattered limbs, fingers, torsos. Entrails strung around and around railings with ears and eyes pinned as ornaments. . .

Breath warmed the back of my neck. I stood on empty sidewalk, but nevertheless felt a claw caress the length of my spine. *Marcy, dear...*

I shivered. I took a step into the smear of an eyeball and my stomach threatened to toss the pizza.

Caelan nosed me in the direction of the truck.

"I'm scared," I admitted, giving the wolf an awkward pat. "But I signed up for this. Let's keep moving." Yet I was plagued by an unshakeable dread that leaving his side meant joining another's. Somewhere between me and the truck crouched a two-legged abomination waiting to wrap its inhuman fingers around my waist and crush its bloody mouth to mine.

Snout to the ground, the wolf wound through the fetid carnage, this time at my side.

Ahead, stood a pool complex. The surrounding fence had been smashed. In the water, a submerged minivan's hazards flashed orange. Caelan hopped the mangled chain link while I shuffled over a lower section.

Chlorine was a potent relief from the stench of death, but the cheerful blue water had been spoiled purple by a shaggy arm bumping against a skimmer.

A firm, low woof turned my attention. The sheriff sat beside a teak storage chest. Colorful noodles, loungers and polka-dotted inner tubes lay scattered in its periphery. It wasn't difficult to surmise someone had emptied the box and jumped inside.

In the blink of an amber eye, I was back at the lake house, down the hall, in the bedroom, frantically shoving aside toys, but this time the shadow stretching through the nightlight was mine. Poor Rhetta. I wiped my eyes. And now this poor soul, too.

The sheriff dropped his paw on the lid and glanced from me to the

chest with a quizzical head tilt. As I approached, he dragged his foot off.

The chest had a hinged lid and a thin indent in the center to grab.

Recalling Calico's staircase descent and the flash of her smile, I came around the back and rapped the sun-toned wood. "This is Marcy Davins and Sheriff Caelan Harlowe, working on behalf of, how do you say it, Caelan? The State of Connecticut? Shit, United States Marshals service? Doesn't matter. You in the box, do you understand?"

Not a growl, but a wheeze. "Yeah." Male, younger, calm. I glanced at Caelan, wondering if he could smell the difference between pure humanity and those transformed to a lesser degree.

"We need you to come out." A pause so long I flipped off the safety and repeated the question, adding a simple, "I won't ask again."

The speaker coughed. "Can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm hurt."

Before I could ask, the sheriff's dark muzzle pressed against the teak. He withdrew relaxed but ready, tension coiling an already stiff posture.

"Please, you've gotta help me. I've gotta get to my sister. She's at a sleepover in Simsbury. She has no idea—"

Steeling my nerves, I curled my fingers around the wood. The hinges caught, clicked in place and held the lid upright.

There quivering at the far end of the chest was a teenage boy. He was human, his face a ghastly reflection of Cho's final pallor. His ears were pierced. He'd gathered himself into a ball, beneath which pooled a slick, smelly liquid. I followed the river of color along his jeans until his hugged knees blocked my view.

I lifted the gun in the air so he could see my finger off the trigger. "We're here to help."

Caelan hung his head over my shoulder, wrinkled his lip and turned away.

“That’s Sheriff Harlowe. I’m his deputy, Marcy. Who are you?”

“Are they gone?”

Without taking my eyes off the boy (he appeared human and wounded, but better safe than sorry) I trusted my lupine partner to monitor the otherwise abandoned poolside. “We’ll be safer in the sheriff’s truck. Can you describe your injuries so we can work on a plan to get you there?”

He pushed sweaty bangs off his face. “Give me a minute?”

“Can I ask you some questions while we wait?”

With the barest nod, “Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“A pack of werewolves attacked us, but their alpha was the devil.”

“The devil?”

“Yeah. He walked on goat legs . . .” The kid’s voice dropped. “Had this black wild mane and wore a crown of feathers and bone. Reeked of smoke, or that was the one of the wrecks.” The pulse in kid’s neck fluttered. “I crashed into Mr. Kulkarni’s mailbox, did you see?”

Swallowing hard, I glanced at Caelan. The wolf was looking north. What were the odds this kid would crash into the mailbox of the man we’d come to interview? “Why’d you crash?”

“I was driving home from dropping Mila off at a sleepover.”

The kid’s blue eyes widened as if awakening from a dream. He refused to say anything else until I assured him the sheriff would retrieve her on our way to the hospital.

“A werewolf jumped in front of my car. I swerved into the mailbox. Mr. Kulkarni dragged me from the passenger’s side and told me we were under attack. They’d already got his wife. We ran for a while, but they caught

us. I escaped because the werewolves left. Like, one minute there's claws cradling my intestines, and in the next he's walking on the sidewalk with the rest of 'em sucking my guts off his paw. I knew I couldn't stay where I was, so I dunno, I went home. I wanted my parents. I think they're dead. I think everyone's dead.

“But I'm hurt real bad, and my phone's crapped out, so I decide to rest and hide in case they come back. The shed where maintenance keeps the mowers was open. Seemed a good place to hide until I heard this woman screaming inside, but not how we were all screaming.”

The whispers in my head came with an almost physical caress. I had an idea of where his story was headed, but asked anyway.

Sporting colorless cheeks, he averted his eyes. “She was having a good time, you know? Like maybe she hadn't heard what's happening. On my way past I peeked in a window. It was dim because the sun had already dropped below the Howling Hill, but I could still see Mrs. Sorensen lying on fertilizer with her dress pushed past her waist and the devil on top of her, grabbing her breasts and stuff. But it, like, it wasn't right. I don't know how to describe it.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was acting like he was kissing her privates, but I heard the crack of her pelvis being chewed. And he's squeezing and crunching and she's writhing with her fingers in his mane begging for more.”

He sobbed.

Caelan remained an impassive spectre, stony expression fixed on the horizon. I wondered how many kids, how many stories, he'd encountered to master the grim, cold outlook of a reaper. Surely the emotionless façade was easier as a wolf, but would he act as stern a man?

Trusting the reaper's diligent watch, I climbed into the chest beside the boy. I wanted to offer him a reassuring smile, but couldn't work the muscles. “You're safe now.”

“It's not over,” he mumbled, wiping tears with a bloody hand. “He knew I was hiding. I saw his hooves on the concrete and heard another man

arguing with him. This other guy was saying I was taking too long. The devil told him I was meant to serve a higher purpose.”

I raised my voice. “We need to go, Caelan.”

The werewolf had his nose to the wind. One ear flicked back toward me in acknowledgment.

From my vantage point, the barest hint of horror stained the kid’s shirt. “We can’t wait. I need to see what’s hurting. Can you show me?”

He eased his legs flat.

I crouched over him, peeled away his t-shirt and held back tears as he twisted and screamed at the lightest touch. Organs bulged against the stinking wound; gravity and one shaking left hand kept his intestines from spilling over his jeans. He wouldn’t make it another half-hour, let alone survive a trip to the ER. Spoke to the kid’s character, that he’d managed himself to this point. He didn’t deserve what was coming.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“James.”

“Well, James, you are one tough cookie.” I climbed from the chest and helped him sit upright against the inside. “We need to move you, but you aren’t walking out of here with that. I’ll have to bring the truck around.” I circled behind the teen. “Sheriff Harlowe will guard you.”

The wolf’s ears perked.

“I can do it, Caelan.” I shifted the gun into a comfortable position and told James the truth. “This is bad.”

“Humpty Dumpty bad,” the boy wheezed. He pointed across the pool. “Our house is past those oaks. You can almost see Mila’s room. My sister, Mila, she loves nursery rhymes. She’s not here. She’s at a sleepover with my mom’s friend ‘cause my parents are taking me to tour Yale tomorrow. 27 Larkspur Lane, Simsbury. You’ve gotta get her.”

“We will, James.” Hot tears rolled down my face. It took every ounce of willpower I had to hold the firearm steady and not throw my arms around the boy.

“Please, you have to. She’s three. I didn’t want to get off my ass and drop her off. I’m so glad I did. If we’d waited, she’d be—”

I shot him in the back of the head. So fast, so sudden, even Caelan flinched. Skull and grey matter splattered the floats. I shut the lid on James' teak coffin, then my stomach constricted and I was vomiting, vomiting, vomiting, until I couldn't do anything more than collapse beside a pink float and dry heave.

My ears rang, my eyes stung, and as I looked to the reaper for comfort, for reassurance I'd been right putting James out of his misery, that quick was better than what teeth or time could have rendered, the wolf walked to the pool's edge and growled. Over the sheriff's raised hackles and flattened ears, a tall, flickering shape lurched into view. A werewolf of the four-pawed variety, charred and burning, dragged its hind legs as it neared the fence.

"Why isn't it dead?" I whispered, resting a sweaty palm on Caelan's flanks. "It should be dead."

Behind us, the wooden chest creaked.

chapter 15

THE WAIT

The lid locked into the open position. Fabric rustled. Nails scraped the chest's wooden, bloodied belly. Cold sweat beaded my neck. Fighting every instinct to run, I turned.

James stood hunched, brain-matted hair fallen across his remaining eye. An eye which, as my sharp inhale alerted Caelan to the rising threat, rolled to the shine of a wet pearl. His fingers twitched and spasmed until the nerves in one hand responded enough to clench the rim of the chest. A leg lifted in the same, volatile manner to step out. I ran over and shoved him back down. He fell into the box a wild beast, grunting, clawing, and gnashing bloody teeth.

I slammed the lid and sat atop as furious, raging howls and thumps beat against the teak.

Caelan's growl flattened to an intense quiet. Black fur shining under his opponent's hellish glow, he rounded the pool and sank into a low stance beside upturned loungers.

Every step smoking, shoulder melting to flame, the werewolf struggled over the low point in the fence. It wriggled and whined, belly caught in an oozing tangle against the chain link until a brutal tug sent its guts slithering. Embers singed the muzzle it directed toward the steaming offal, tattered ears lifting as if in surprise.

A wheezing howl ripped from the remains of its throat.

Answers, mutilated and wholesome both, consumed the night.

I covered my ears, cringing. My throat burned, my eyes watered.

The sheriff leaped. In a swift, deft motion his jaws cut the instigator's cry. The werewolves became a blur of searing ash and flame, tumbling over and over again toward the pool. Momentum flung them into the deep end in a hiss of steam and bubbled growls.

The pungent char of flesh and fur drifted through the oily chlorine.

Ready on the trigger, I watched the churning waters.

Golden eyes cleared the surface. Ears pinned, Caelan squeezed past the wreck and paddled to the shallows. Dirty water fell away, but crimson soaked his neck and shoulder. I ran to him, didn't know what I'd do once I got there, but we were getting the hell out together.

A black snout and milky eyes emerged beneath the shadow of the diving board. Extinguished but undeterred, the undead wolf scabbled against the van's wreckage.

Considering the savage in the chest, I had my doubts taking aim at the wolf's skull. Pulling the trigger confirmed them. The bullet stalled the wolf for a yelped second, then blackened flesh sheered off its hips as it forced its uncoordinated lower half around the van.

The chest lid banged open. This time with startling finesse, the corpse jumped from the chest in a sagging splash of organs. Arms wide, one kidney and part of his stomach flopped against his thigh, James flashed a chipped grin. "If you're praying for a miracle, here I am!"

I heard in his voice echoes of my grandfather and froze.

Water dripped down my neck. I glanced up to Caelan's snarl over my shoulder.

The teen's remaining eye soured emerald. He frowned. "Can't allow me to lead a single parade without storming in, can you? And not even an umbrella for the lady." James smoothed the remains of his skull into place,

then crooked one clotted finger. “Now you, my ravening rainbow, the wait for you has been worth the lightning’s bite.”

Caelan tackled James. The teen was in six pieces before I could find my scream. The teen was in six pieces, and still his lips moved.

“Spitting image of Gen, stained dress and all,” he continued despite the physical mechanics shredded and scattered in a ten foot radius. James, rather, the thing possessing him, wormed his tongue through a hole Caelan’s fang had punched through the bottom lip. “Let me take you home, doll. You’ve been too long in circulation. I’ll change your clothes, brush your hair, play with you the way you were meant to be enjoyed—”

Caelan’s jaws closed over the sight. He dropped the head into the pool. It bobbed up a lifeless, blue-eyed teen.

Near the van, watching through pearlescent eyes, the burned wolf broke into a panting grin. One of James’ detached arms lifted at the elbow, waved, and pointed behind us, where three bloody shadows rushed the rear fence.

A stare and lowered haunches was all the invitation required for me to scramble onto the sheriff’s back. I ditched the gun, there was no hope of fitting it in my dress pocket and no holding both it, the truck keys, and the giant wolf. My arms clung perhaps too hard around his lacerations, because the wolf gave a jostling shake, then he’d blown past the fence and we were in the street as a horde of undead condensed.

Time dragged like the feet of the dying. Every step Caelan made to stretch the gap between us and them bristled with endless worry. Legs and shoulders, hands and paws, collided in a black mass as the dead barreled from yards and alleys into the center street.

The truck and opened gates loomed on the horizon, but the monsters were gaining speed and mass. There was no outrunning the surrounding dark.

A woman with a fluttering red scarf perched on the stag statue. She screeched, white eyes enraged, thin, triangular ears pinned against her greying pompadour.

As she sprang for us, Caelan skidded to a halt so hard I flew over his head and slammed into the pavement. He caught the half-human by the neck and flung her into the fountain, clearing the path to the truck. Rolling to my

feet, cursing through a bloody lip, I found the keys and stumbled to the driver's side. Head snapped back and bouncing between her shoulder blades, the drenched corpse ran after me.

Caelan leaped into the back. The wolf hunkered down as I turned the key.

Headlights flashed across lathered fangs and shining eyes, then I'd floored it through the gate, remembering at the wobble we were rolling on a flat. A shape wet and hissing smashed against the hood with a sickening crack and bounced over the windshield, but I refused to stop, didn't do more than tilt the rearview mirror to see if I had the right werewolf in my bed.

Over Caelan's shoulder, in the shadow of the gate, a massive, ruddy werewolf extended its arm. Dragging whatever parts they had left, the undead broke rank and receded into the village depths. The monster loped into the dust of our tire tracks. Its head lifted. There was no way I could've heard the howl, and yet my head was filled with a resounding cry of, "*Come home!*"

As though a puppet severed, the animal collapsed on the ground several yards past the shriveled daffodils and tulips.

I'd attended several funerals with Gram. While paying respects, she'd rest her hand on the coffin or headstone and whisper, "Now you know something I don't."

Tonight, I was glad to leave answers to rot.

I turned on the radio, unable to sit in silence without hearing my name sighed against my ear. I'd gotten through a litany of commercials when a sticky fist pounded the truck's rear window.

I eased on the gas and pulled over. Naked as the day he was whelped, the sheriff jumped over the side and was at the door waiting as I opened it.

Jagged punctures and scrapes congealed at the base of his throat. Concerned, I reached for him, but as the wolf settled into human expression he wore a lip-curved glower. I tossed him the boxers and pants and slid over to let him drive.

As the sheriff changed, a radio host announced an acoustics hour in Keith's mellow tone.

I groaned. "You've gotta be kidding me." I cleaned my hands with wet wipes from the glove compartment and changed the station.

Caelan leaned over and fixed my headband. "You okay, Marcy?"

"No." I shivered. Stains marred the dress anywhere my jacket hadn't protected: child's blood, I thought, knocking a smudge off the top of my one

remaining shoe and onto the floor liner. “What was that?”

“A monster I’ve been hunting.” The man rubbed the quick-knitting flesh of his throat. He was covered in a mix of blood and fur, but after James, Caelan’s appearance didn’t bother me, not even when his arm bumped mine as he pulled on his shirt. When he’d gotten enough buttons to look respectable, he brushed his thumb over his bottom lip and added, “Got a little something there.”

I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. “A ‘hey, we’re braking’ would’ve been nice.”

“Woman on top is a new experience for me,” he said with a cool smile. “In the heat of the moment, instinct is difficult to control. I needed to stop so I stopped. Werewolves aren’t meant for hurtling down sidewalks with human women on their backs.”

“Cowgirl can be dangerous,” I agreed, passing him a stack of wet wipes. Blood trickled over my swollen smile. If I didn’t laugh I’d cry. If I didn’t make light, I’d be consumed by the dark or the hungry, green-eyed devil waiting inside it.

The body lay prone across the road, head resting across its outstretched arm. Its muzzle, human if you squinted through a kaleidoscope, had a pug nose; deep-set wrinkles and opened onto an interspecies mixture of teeth. The eyes were enlarged and the pupils constricted. The skin was dark, its fur short and ruddy over a wide scalp and sparsely furred bat ears. Dew coated its body. The abandoned gatehouse and dead flowers loomed some distance behind.

I hovered a few steps behind Caelan, holding my elbows because there was no holding his hand. “We’re safe?”

Rocks crunched underfoot as the sheriff paced ahead toward the creature. “Stand where you are and you will be.”

Crickets and nocturnal insects buzzed through spidery branches.

Sparing a longing glance at the truck, I bucked up and strode alongside him, cursing every so often as my bare foot discovered a sharp pebble. He glanced over his shoulder at me, eyebrows raised.

“Piggyback? Promise I’ll be gentle on the dismount.”

I frowned but accepted.

When we reached the corpse illuminated in the headlights, Caelan put me down. Crouching, he set two fingers into the gloss of fur covering the werewolf’s throat.

“Touch,” the sheriff said in soft request, reaching for my hand. While he seemed confident its clouded eyes wouldn’t roll nor its jaws clamp around his arm with a shark’s blind fury, I was hesitant. But the assurance of his grip and a “deader than disco, trust me” was enough to lure a couple of my fingers toward its neck.

“Swear to God, if you scare me—”

“You’re both victims, Marcy. I wouldn’t.”

I believed the sentiment in his eyes and pressed my fingers against one bulging, cold vein. “Damn! Didn’t realize you had to break through ice to crawl outta hell.”

“Cold, damp bodies upon demonic departure: these particular spirits were dredged from the seafloor,” he began. “They serve L’*enfer* Requins, a religious organization built of muddied waters and shark’s teeth. Their high priest is known as the Second Head. I believe he was the ‘devil’ that young man claimed to have seen.”

“Who’s the First Head?”

“The thing that spoke through the kid.”

“A demon? Demons know details, right?”

“Think of them as mentalists with access to an undead search engine. They know more than you, but require references to succeed. I’ve been tracking this thing for a while. Not sure what it is, but it’s got some demonic tendencies.”

He retrieved gloves for both of us from the truck and had me angle a flashlight at its mouth. The light flickered in my palm. I gave the batteries a tentative shake.

“What are you looking for?”

“Signature.” Caelan grabbed the werewolf by its hairy chin and pushed back first the upper then lower lip. “Note the stitching on the forearm, Marcy. Reattached after death, fungal growth between stitches; this fellow died elsewhere. Appears to be a hyena variant, none of which belong to Talon or Metacombet.”

I felt embarrassed for not recognizing the animal influence, but kept quiet and listened.

“The inside lip is a popular inscription choice for golems, homunculi and the controlled dead.”

He tipped the werehyena’s snout, and, holding its tongue flat, pried the jaws wide. A piece of burlap no larger than a tea bag had been pinned to the soft palate. Caelan reached inside and peeled the fabric away. Translucent flakes glittered in the corpse’s throat.

“Fish scales, bone dust, and octopus powder,” he explained, lifting the slimed burlap. “The Second Head strikes deals with a certain type of demon, in this case an ancient follower of a deity long dead or dormant, so he uses a particular potpourri to attract them.”

Under the truck’s headlights it was easy to recognize the anatomical human heart similar to what had been painted on Stephen’s tail. Paying more attention, I noted tentacles in place of the aorta and arteries.

“Patches mark bodies for a higher class of demonic possession, one capable of commanding its brethren and sharing control with a necromancer. Without a mark, a necromancer can invite spirits in, but it’s more a case of whatever’s meanest and closest gaining possession. The necromancer can’t speak through them, and there’s no guarantee whatever moves in will listen to its raiser. Every Halloween our department’s plagued with calls from morons who thought it’d be a good idea to bring someone back from the dead, come to find out what returned isn’t the person and they can’t be controlled. Necromancers, the dangerous ones, strike deals with powerful demons beforehand and use the patch to draw it into the body.”

“James was alive. He couldn’t have had a patch, could he?”

“James troubles me,” Caelan admitted, bagging the evidence. “Once something moves in, it’s near impossible to give it the boot, unless it wants to leave or the magic breaks. Necromancers climb inside the dead, not the living. Hence why killing James brought the demon to the forefront, but—”

“—there was a noticeable difference between the first time he rose

and the second.”

“Exactly. Reckon the Second Head could’ve promised the kid he’d survive his wounds if he wore the patch and spouted whatever tale he was instructed, but the kid was hiding in a box. We’ll need to recover his body to even entertain that possibility.” He sealed the bag shut. “It’s rare, but a strong enough demon could have clawed the lesser spirit out of the body and taken its place. A patch would strengthen the odds. Should’ve snagged his head, but I was saving my teeth for you.”

“James mentioned he crashed at your interview’s home,” I said. “Who knew about your meeting?”

Caelan frowned. “Suppose I’ll be inquiring after my team.”

After tonight, I needed to engage in serious research and some lighthearted viewing to keep my spirits lifted. Sam and Dean Winchester marathon weekend sounded excellent, provided I survived the rest of the week.

A breeze carried decay through the painted gates. We stood once more over the body. I bent and closed the werehyena’s eyes. “So, we’re dealing with a necromancer and some type of demon or demon-like thing,” I began. “That explains how James kept talking after you annihilated him. Doesn’t explain the whispering in my ear, though.”

Caelan’s eyes as he turned contained a flash of predatory fascination. “It does what now?”

I rubbed my arm. “Whispers. Touches me in my sleep, sometimes, unless the latter’s my overactive imagination. I felt it in Stag Hill stronger than ever, calling my name, running its claw down my back when there was nothing around. The feeling disappeared when we neared James, or I was too distracted to notice. I heard it again in your truck.” Sirens howled through the uneasy peace. “It’s quiet now.”

“When did this start?”

“End of January. We’d received a heavily damaged painting at work. I was assigned to the restoration.” Embarrassed, I ground a pebble underneath my shoe. “I began having these horned up dreams starring this green-eyed nobody from a night circus. At first I thought, whatever, it’s a dream and it’s pretty damn hot. Good for me, right? But the man kept appearing. His face changes from night to night, he was even Keith, once.” Blushing, I quickly added. “Not you. He’s never looked like you.”

“Should I be offended, Miss Davins?”

“Nah, I haven’t gotten much sleep since meeting you. I’m sure you’ll turn up.”

His smile grew then quickly faded. “How do you know it’s the same man?”

“No matter his face, his eyes are the most intense emerald. Over time, my dreams decayed. What he did gradually darkened and now when I close my eyes what I see is dead and what I—*Shit!*”

A werewoman's pale face leered out from the darkness over Caelan’s shoulder. Right arm a twitching nub, eyes clouded and fangs bared, the woman lunged forward in a frayed skirt and blouse. I pushed him aside and flung the flashlight at her. It cracked her gnashing teeth and clattered to the pavement. Touching her fangs as if in disbelief, she staggered to a halt.

The sheriff regained his balance, held up a hand to halt my apology and walked behind her quicker than she could shamble. She made a weak lunge for him. He dodged and knocked her over the werehyena. Her chin bounced off the corpse’s chest, where she lay dead and cold as ice.

Caelan nudged her heel, waited, then gathered both her feet into his hands and dragged her toward Stag Hill.

Her toes flexed. One bruised knee twitched. The sheriff released, moved to her reanimating torso and dragged her back beside the hyena.

Dead.

Alive.

In the span of three feet.

“High number of victims, electrical interference, high level corpse management: I’d say the Second Head’s running quite the black magic carnival. Would have laid the spell a week in advance and triggered it this evening: anything dead within the established perimeters, free for possession. Anything outside the limits, dead again.” He gestured at the darkness. “Mighty impressive cast range. Can’t fathom why he’d let us escape.”

Underneath a night sky that added shades of bruises to my bloodstains, I searched the road for stragglers. “What do we do?” I called to the sheriff, whose attention remained fixed on the twinkling, peaceful entry to Stag Hill.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Kill the necromancer before he kills you.”

chapter 16

AND THEY CALL FOXES SLY

Wind billowed the woman's sleeve. She lay in disheveled repose, blonde hair knotted against a fragmented skull. I straightened her body and brushed her curls over the damage.

Caelan cleared his throat, but a screaming howl stopped whatever he'd been about to say.

The thread from death to undeath had unraveled to its limit. Despite knowing this, at the piercing cry I scrambled about ten feet away from the bodies.

The sheriff scanned the road and woods, but the night where we stood had crept into normalcy: crickets and spring peepers, a fox's stiff bark, the click of a doe's heels as she crossed the road behind the tailgate.

Rubbing his tattoo, the sheriff leaned against the dented hood and looked me over from ratty ponytail to chipped toenail polish. "If you're planning on partnering with me, you need to understand this kind of danger is regular and expected."

"And inevitable, in my case."

Caelan lifted a shoulder. "You want in?"

Tentatively, I extended my hand. "I want in."

We shook. He patted the space beside him. "Prick those human ears and listen close, Miss Davins."

I moved so we were shoulder to shoulder overlooking the fallen community.

"I headed up and east chasing prey after joining an investigation into

a series of disturbances in Louisiana. Werewolf there claimed worse than gators prowled the bayous. Pouches of fish scales and skulls hanging from cypress trees, white eyes in the mist, dead deer rising and running mid-bite. A year earlier, a gator tour found a young woman's body dumped outside New Orleans. She'd been rumored to be the second coming of the great voodoo queen, Marie Laveau. Several disputes broke out among community leaders and rivals over which faction should fill the power vacuum. Leaders either disappeared or their remains were found torn and partially consumed. Consensus was one faction was using necromancy to sick undead Werewolf on the rest. As the body count rose, the suspect list shrank. One those suspects, a musical therapist by the name of Ingram Hayes, was tipped off and fled Louisiana. Soon after, reports trickled in from other states, culminating in a spike of disappearances and undead activity in Connecticut. Gannon, your retired sheriff, failed to contain the outbreak.”

“And here you are.”

“Here you are,” he corrected, “tangled in this web. Ingram has killed a lot of people, but more and more frequently, we’ve been encountering zombies in bridal gowns, all of them with their hearts ripped or eaten out. So far, I’ve recovered nine different species of the Otherworld. I ain’t sure what he’s doing, but he’s either failing or practicing. Thing is, he hasn’t taken a human in this way. I think that’s about to change.”

I felt numb, nervous and drained as adrenaline dissipated. Without prompt, I went and sat inside the truck. The sheriff joined me, occasionally glancing my direction.

“I know it’s hard,” he said.

“What's going to happen here, Caelan? This was an entire community. People with jobs, friends, families. What is your government—”

“Our government,” he corrected. “Already told you, Miss Davins. I’m the wrecking ball, not the cleanup crew. Given the state of the bodies found and the probable number missing, this will be deemed the result of a horrific cult. Ingram Hayes is wanted by the FBI. He’ll rightly take the blame for this.”

“What about James’ sister?” I willed myself not to cry. “She’s gonna

need so much help when it finally sinks in that they're lost forever and she's alone in this world."

Caelan made an understanding sound in the depths of his throat and gently, delicately, patted my shoulder. "I'll see she's cared for."

"Lisa—" My voice cracked. The image of James scattered across the concrete would haunt me forever. "Lisa always made sure I renewed my CPR certification and yet I reached straight for the gun."

Caelan's phone rang. He silenced it and tossed it on the dash. A 'Jali Mishra-Anderson' went to voicemail. "You feel guilty."

"A part of me doesn't. A part of me thinks I was right."

"Didn't take more than a sniff to know he was hamburg."

"That's mean."

He shrugged. "That's death. The end ain't pretty."

I shook my head. "Not true. Walk the halls of the Wadsworth, the National Gallery, or the Louvre, and you will find death sculptured, drawn, painted, laced and hung. And should you bend close as I do in my work, should you examine expressions, weapons, dying poses and fading pigments...You'll find beauty." I swallowed hard, wiping my cheek. "But I don't see how someone could ever dare make so beautiful the destruction I saw tonight."

"There's a difference between what hangs on the wall and what knocks at your door." I realized at that moment the man's hand warmed mine. When I looked down, he returned it to the steering wheel. "This will hit the news. Far as your housemate is concerned, we ate pizza, went for drinks and I got the call."

"Thanks." A shift in focus helped, even if it was temporary. "Why would the necromancer want publicity?"

"The slaughter will keep our hands full with the press, but he's been

picking off werewolf for several months. Likely he's close to realizing his end game and has tired of taking only the foolish and unfortunate. Also possible the spider jiggled his web and addressed you direct because he wants something he can't get by taking you. Don't believe it was an accident my team became preoccupied with a murder after we'd left your home."

I touched my puffy lip. "He told me I'm the spitting image of my grandmother and I should go home."

"Is there anything in your actual familial history I should be aware of, Marcy?"

"Mom had breast cancer. Dad couldn't work and support her needs so we moved into my grandparents' lake house. Couple weeks later, the werewolf slaughtered them, my paternal grandparents who'd travelled from Greece to visit, and my sister." Rubbing my eyes, I leaned against the headrest, curious to learn what he'd unearthed about me, uncertain how many gaps to fill in. Calico's warning that sheriffs charm and sheriffs isolate still rang loud in my head. "Sorry, Caelan. I can't talk right now. I've slept like four hours in the past two days. If you or someone could bring me home, I'd be grateful."

"Until we know what home means to the necromancer, you shouldn't be alone in yours."

"I meant to say Cal's."

He nodded. "Listen, if you're uncomfortable with her pack, you don't have to stay there. I could return you to your friend's apartment, the station, a hotel, or you can crash at my place. None are a fortress from the undead, but safe enough for shut-eye."

I wanted my own home and Samson and Igor, but understood. "Yours," I decided. "Fewest people, least possible carnage."

"I can't stay with you."

"That's alright."

“Believe me when I say I’ll know if you snoop.”

“I’ll behave.”

“Alright.” Caelan fidgeted, playing with the door lock. “Backup’s almost here. Would like to change the tire, if you’re okay?”

“Go ahead.” It was a wonder he hadn't already escaped the truck and retreated into the spring air and left this heavy staleness behind. “Hey, how can anyone enter Stag Hill?”

“The coach driver and footmen will turn back into mice within a few hours, Cinderella.”

“This isn't a fairytale.”

“Says the girl who lost her shoe.” He helped me out of the truck. “Raised dead run on timers. Not even the southern queens have preserved the state of undeath beyond a few days, let alone so many at this scale.”

“Does the necromancer need to be nearby to speak through the dead?”

“Once he’s attached his signature to the corpse, they’re his eyes to borrow whenever and wherever he pleases.”

“Was it the necromancer or the demon addressing us?”

“Hard to say.”

Blue and red lights filled the breadth of the road not fifteen minutes later. We learned a large oak had felled across the road a mile back, delaying help one step further. Caelan addressed a small assembly of werewolves. The majority stripped off their clothes, changing one after the other, hands and paws alike, except a photographer and what might've been a medical examiner. The pair moved to photograph the fallen woman and werehyena.

As the flashes faded, the dead woman's body stiffened and swelled. Blood leaked from beneath the body; the skin bulged and ripped across the

bridge of her nose. Photographer and examiner, chatting, stepped back. With a steamy pop, the wolf within burst through the dead woman's skin.

Caelan slipped into the driver's seat. I couldn't take my eyes off her, off the stretched, torn skin and fabric covering her fur in pale patches. "Death tells the truth," he said. "Wolves for the first breath and the last."

I stared across the cracked windshield at the dead wolf, at the living, and beyond the flashing lights into a night as vast and peaceful as any other.

Wedge on a narrow road between an orchard and public high school, the drive to the sheriff's home couldn't have been prettier. We passed rows of flowering peach and apple trees, out to reclaimed farmland where stars hugged the horizon. Woods kept the nearest homes from learning each other's business.

To Caelan, home was a two-bedroom ranch of flaking turquoise paint, a large garage and shrubs that hadn't felt a gardener's glove in years. Ugly, if I was being honest, and we had arrived past midnight.

The sheriff must've noticed my distaste as he said, "Hoping to be out within the year. Wanted a place cheap with room to roam."

Land he had. His yard was flat; the back lawn stretched a good quarter mile before transitioning to forest.

Whatever hopes I'd had for the interior died at the art deco screen door. Garish wallpaper and shag painted a dated picture about as lived in as the day he'd arrived, judging from the stacks of cardboard boxes.

I ran a finger along his dusty fireplace mantle. "See you're going for a spread straight out of good housekeeping."

"As stated, Miss Davins, I'll know if you snoop. This is where I sleep."

It's not where I live," he replied, making me clean my feet with a damp rag before narrating the journey.

Kitchen, bathroom, living room, finished porch. Nothing spectacular, nothing special.

"Made a mistake inviting you," he continued, pushing the door to the master. "Second bedroom, yes. Second bed, no."

I grinned. "And they call foxes sly."

"Got spare sheets and I ain't staying so you should survive fine."

The bedroom, at least, he cared about. The walls were a sapphire made richer by blackout curtains. The hardwood was refinished, the area rug soft, the bed a roomy queen, and the attached bathroom clean.

"Quite the cave," I observed, leaning against the door frame as he pulled back a white comforter.

"When my head hits the pillow, I want to sleep. No tossing or turning." With a grin to rival his wolf form, he paused, one hand on a plush navy throw. "Well, maybe some, present company excluded."

"You bring company to this dust pit?"

"Your raggedy cat and I can count on one paw the number of people we'd willingly allow into our home, however; I receive enough invitations without having to host."

"Gross."

"What can I say? I'm an animal." He struggled to look at me with a straight face. "If I'm not mistaken, you invited me tonight."

"To dinner."

"A ruse," he said dismissively, stripping the sheets. "Tonight's master plan involved you, me, and a compromising position."

My face might've turned a brighter scarlet than my dress, however, the mental image of shredding skin and fangs sinking into undead torsos served as effective blush control. "This may be a four letter night, Caelan, but I don't have any more to give. You win. I admit Cal's plan was stupid, but

I'm attracted to you so I hopped along for the ride. I am as bad as the date you rescued me from. Happy?"

"Yes." He was not a humble victor. "Can't blame you, Miss Davins. Reapers are a high-energy working breed. We require a couple hours of daily exercise."

"It shows."

"Thank you." He tucked the sheets under his arm and stopped beside me in the doorway, making certain to meet my eyes. "I like teasing you, Marcy, but I hope you know I think real highly of you."

"Oh!" I said, feeling as though a butterfly had tumbled down my throat. "I would say the same."

"Glad to hear it." His was a smile that led to making more than butterflies. "I'll grab the spare sheets. Once you're comfortable, I'm returning to the scene. What do you need: pillows, blankets? My house is yours. Whatever you do, please don't use my toothbrush."

"Because that's so much worse than your skin sliding onto my floor."

"Fun fact: werewolves are trained to bury or consume the remnants of their shift. The Vilkas orchard has thrived on decades of werewolf remains. Now, speaking of gross." He gestured at my spattered attire.

I gestured right back.

With his permission, I swiped a shirt from his closet and jumped in his shower. He used the guest bath. When I'd emerged, clean everywhere but spirit, he was setting a glass of water on a nightstand.

"Drink," he instructed as I brushed damp fingers through my hair. "May not halt the incoming headache, but it'll keep you fresh around the gills."

"Nothing stronger?" I asked, propping myself up against the headboard.

“Your stomach needs a break.”

“I don't know how your stomach is fine and dandy considering what you bit into. No, not what: who.”

“There's advil in the nightstand.” He perched on the end of the bed, not uneasily, but without the earlier cheer. “Wolves, at least those of us with paws, use our mouths a lot. Remember, shedding skin means things taste, smell, and look different. Biting feels natural to those raised as werewolves.”

“You tore James apart.”

“Scattered bones are safer than well-assembled corpses.” He studied my face. “Marcy, have you ever killed before tonight?”

“You mean, besides spiders?” I pulled the sheets up and hugged my knees. “Hit a squirrel once. Felt the bump as my tire rolled over its head.”

“Far cry from a teenage boy.”

I took a sip of water. “Not sure how to live with myself.”

“The necromancer ended his life. You showed mercy to a boy who'd climbed into his coffin and shut the lid.”

“What if I hadn't fired the gun? Maybe the dead wouldn't have come.”

“They were stirring long before you pulled the trigger,” Caelan said. “We ran by several animate limbs on the way to the pool. Hadn't you noticed?”

“No, or whatever I saw my brain wrote off.”

“First werewolf would have arrived and I would have dispatched the boy before the dead got him. He knew he wasn't walking out alive. Why do you think he pressed you to find his sister?”

“‘Dispatched?’ That's what you call a murder?”

In the soft ambiance of lamplight, his eyes seemed dim, forlorn and human. “Not everyone retires snuggled in bed with family and friends gathered and their bucket list completed. The lives left incomplete, especially those innocent or good, are most haunting.”

Abandoning the sheet, I moved across the mattress to be beside him. “Do you remember your first kill?”

“A beetle or small lizard in my pen. I’ve killed to survive since I was a pup. Killed dozens of werewolves before a single human, but I’ve killed plenty of everything since.”

It took a moment to process what he’d said. “A *pen*?”

He stared hard at the carpet. “Where I come from, you don’t walk on two legs until you’ve proven steady on four.”

I rested my hand on his knee. “Sounds awful.”

“I am.” Caelan returned my hand to my lap. “I’ve killed so much, when I come across someone who hasn’t, it reminds me of everything I don’t feel.”

Respecting his space, I eased toward my pillow. “You could choose to feel.”

“I was bred to keep humans and Otherworld members safe. Feeling invites mistakes.” He waved at my thigh. “I felt Stephen’s death and look what happened.”

“You can't be bred for—”

He rose, pulled a set of keys from his pocket and jingled them. “If you’re comfortable, I need to be getting gone. Do not let anyone in. If they don't have me and this key, they can't come in, alright? I left a spare on the kitchen counter. If you're feeling safe come morning, call yourself a ride home and lock the door behind you. You can return the key when next we

meet. You want to stay longer, let me know.”

“Thanks.”

“Sleep well.”

“Caelan?”

He paused at the door.

“There’s as much man in you as there is wolf.”

Once his truck had disappeared into the quiet night, I settled back in the sheets and turned off the lamp. There was nothing waiting in the darkness. Nothing. And yet my dreams were full of anticipation.

When morning brightened the curtains to soft grey, I called a cab and poked around his living room bookcase. The books were clean and dusted, the spines preserved, the edges of a few soft covers dented.

You could learn a lot about a person from what they read and how they treated books. Arcane laws and foreign regulations, texts on monsters, unusual species and rare sightings. Animal behavior studies. Criminal investigations. Top shelf, I found Carroll and Tolkien and Poe; Gaiman and Pratchett and Rowling. There was fantasy, and broken worlds, heroes with hardship and villains with vision.

And in a Barnes and Noble bag nearby, a hardcover on Theodore Roosevelt.

The cab arrived. I didn’t have any pants and couldn’t shimmy on a bloodstained dress, but hell no was I calling for Lisa, so I texted Caelan an SOS pleading for him to dispose of my dress and to let me borrow a tee and pair of sweats.

Caelan allowed me back at my house, but only with a guard on my front and back doors. After a breakfast of toast and strong black coffee, I checked my voicemail.

Work asking when I'd return. A friend from grad school with a question about transparent glazes. Work hinting at an upset donor. Becky asking after last night. Work, informing me that the museum suffered a theft the night prior, not in the main gallery but within the conservation lab.

The thief had ignored priceless masterpieces, targeting instead *Ritual Conduit*. Security camera footage caught a tall, thin man ambling along the gate seconds before the entire system short-circuited.

The fortune teller existed only in a relatively harmless form of smoked oil and varnish, but the idea of those watchful eyes somewhere out there, in the possession of my apparent stalker no less, gave me a stomach ache. Home didn't feel safe anymore; I was beginning to feel no where was, as if I were a moth flown into a spider's web and there was nothing but sticky, gossamer strands every which way I thrashed.

Compounding my panic was the fact I wasn't reporting to work, ticking off the first step in the reaper's purported process: distance the naive human from people who'd notice her absence. Caelan could have instructed a deputy to take the painting.

I pushed the thought away. He and I had established a working relationship. I needed someone with the jaw strength to dismantle walking corpses. He needed someone to lure the necromancer out of hiding. If we both survived to see the case resolved, I'd deal with him then.

For now, Gramps' voice a broken record on repeat in my head, I started on Gram's documents and scoured the house for hidden secrets. Turned out her beloved curio had contained more than dolls.

We'd gone by 'Davins' since the move. Gram had done a fine job burying the past, but her marriage certificate, taped inside a false cabinet panel in an envelope also containing birth certificates, bore her true name: Genessa Kahn.

Calico had referred to Gram as 'Gen,' and that was dirt worth sifting through, but I needed a break from wolves.

Grandpa didn't have a birth certificate. His signature beside Gen's on the marriage license rang false. A German man with a Nazi officer's ring named Warren Benjamin?

They had married February 18th, 1946 at a chapel in Richmond, Virginia.

Mom's birth register was a slip of paper in Greek. Evelyn Lois Kahn. January 4, 1946. Birth witnessed by Elfriede Vlahos.

According to Grandma, allied forces liberated Dachau sometime in late April 1945. She remembered because many hundreds of prisoners, including Elfriede, celebrated Orthodox Easter shortly after. I'd have to research the date Genessa and Warren met, but nine months and no werewolf tendencies inherited by Mom or Rhetta and I?

Maybe Grandpa wasn't my grandpa.

Gram said the war had stolen more than fifty members of our family, and the ones remaining were so distant they had not even remembered her mother's name. After the war, she instead moved to Greece with Elfriede.

Gram hadn't saved much correspondence, but I had her address book in a desk drawer. I compared names from there with the guest book from her funeral.

An Elfrie Vlahos was listed in both.

"There are friends you never lie to," she'd told me one late summer afternoon as we sat on the porch awaiting Elfrie. "You may not tell them everything, but you don't damn lie."

From there, it took about an hour's worth of awkward phone calls to get in touch. Elfrie had moved from her original home and changed numbers in the process.

Her daughter, after enduring a long-winded Facebook explanation from me about researching my grandmother's past, surrendered the phone number to Elfrie's condo. Elfrie lived Charleston, spent her retirement playing bingo and attending aqua aerobics in a senior living residence. When I called, she couldn't talk. She was on her way out the door to a group mall trip and needed to buy clothes for a baby shower, but if I tried around three, she'd be happy to answer any question she could.

I leaned back in the kitchen chair and stared at the slashed screen above the sink.

Maybe if I'd stayed on the couch, if I kissed the accountant and ignored the world around us. Maybe if we took things upstairs, if Igor and Samson followed...Maybe the cat wouldn't have gotten out, maybe...

Come home.

I took another sip of coffee and thumbed through home insurance papers. Maybe, no matter how much Gram wanted and how hard she tried, normal wasn't my destiny.

chapter 17

THE LAST LEAF

Lisa and Wyatt would arrive around six. Plan was to grab dinner, chat, and figure out what to do with my stressed cats. Igor had scared the hell out of Wyatt when she'd popped out from underneath the bed last night at two AM when he'd went to pee. She'd also licked herself bald around her stomach scars and Samson had decided to fast.

I bought the cats a new scratching post, a bag of food, and toys. On my way home, I purchased a couple budding hydrangeas to replace the blood-engorged plants on the porch and side. After I'd arranged the plants and feasted on a sleeve of crackers, I unfolded a camping chair near the ruins of the back deck and basked in the sunshine under the watchful eye of a cop.

Reluctantly, I dragged myself into the privacy of my home to take the call.

Grandma rarely talked about the numbers inked on her arm or the horrors that had transpired between the time her brother was judged physically handicapped and sterilized to when my mother was born.

And here I was, about to ask her friend for information she'd never given willingly. Here I was, making Elfrie reflect on unimaginable hell. The lifelong friends had met when my grandmother was transferred to Dachau. How do you ask someone about that? Where do you start?

"Thank you," I began, tightness reaching my throat. "Thank you, Mrs. Vlahos."

"Elfrie is fine."

"Sorry to dredge up the past."

"Don't apologize, dear. Guardian angels deserve remembrance. If it gives her granddaughter peace, I will tell you anything."

Notebook in hand, I settled into my accent chair where I could still

soak in the sunlight. “Did you know Grandpa Warren well? I’m struggling to understand how what happened, happened. Thought if I knew his past, it’d explain what he’d become.”

“Gen never said? No? Ah, always was difficult for her to reconcile; didn’t acknowledge weakness, your grandmother. Everything was always fine, doing fine, going to turn out swell. Warren didn’t get the help he needed soon enough and the pair of them were too proud to ask. Help might’ve saved your family. I lost a nephew to early onset dementia a few years ago. Awful, awful disease, but your grandfather in his prime was a fine fellow. Quiet. Kept to himself, but so kind. I know you won’t want to hear it because of the end, but, oh, he spoiled your mother and you kids.”

I snapped the plastic clip off my pen. “He was an Allied soldier, right? A member of one of the first units into Dachau?”

“We didn’t see him that day; and if we had, we would never have known in the confusion. The men who came, I didn’t believe they were real until I reached though the fence and rubbed the wool of a soldier’s sleeve between my fingers and felt his dirty nails touch my cheek. I saw in his eyes the reflection of us gathered skeletons and fainted away on the spot. Warren met your grandmother in the town as we left. He had given her bread. She fed me and a stray cat she’d been taming and asked if the Americans would give her a job as a translator. For days he brought us what food he could spare, until he had to leave for his next assignment. He could not get her a job, but with his help we contacted my cousin who agreed to take us home to Greece. Did you know your mother met your father while on a vacation to visit me? Oh, your grandparents were furious! Private charter to Mt. Athos, cruising past ancient monasteries and all she wants to explore is the captain’s son.”

“Yeah, Grandpa Olexei planned to take the fam for a tour when my sister and I were old enough to appreciate the scenery but young enough not to run away with boys.”

Elfrie sighed. “Knowing their fates, I still struggle to believe what happened. The man I knew would never have done such a thing. He loved your grandmother, sure as your grandmother loved him. After what we endured, I thought their hope for the future was beautiful. He met us in Thessaloniki, proposed, and whisked her and your mother away to Arlington.”

However kind he’d been, he ended a monster. Mom’s birth certificate rested on my lap. There was no death certificate for the victim of a rogue

werewolf. "I've found records with Gram's belongings. My mother's birthday is too early for Grandpa Warren. Do you know who got her pregnant?"

Elfrie paused so long I asked if she was still there. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry."

"Please."

"She'll be rolling in her grave."

She very well might have been. I rubbed my healing thigh, a good reminder to reach out to Caelan's range instructor. A revolver wouldn't stop the necromancer's minions, but Ingraham Hayes was mortal. "Listen, Elfrie, someone's asking me to come home. Being the last leaf on my branch of the family tree, I'm struggling to verify the connection."

"Ignore them, sweetie. That branch was cut before you were born. You may be a sapling, but you are your own tree."

"Why?"

"Had the winds of war not blown her astray, Gen planned to leave the family farm to become a film noir actress: the next femme fatale. The family hated her decision. And all I knew of her, she was so kind! One day I asked, 'Gen, How could you play a dangerous woman?'

'I'm an actress, Elfrie,' she'd replied. 'I can play anyone.'"

"She wanted to be an actress?"

"In all but title she was, Marcy! She was a phenomenal impressionist and spoke with the flair of a summer breeze."

"Quick right to the end," I agreed.

"But a fox in her prime. I tell you, Marcy, her wits kept us alive in Dachau and on the road to Greece. No wonder Warren fell hard and fast. He wasn't alone, either. Rumor was she transferred from Auschwitz after winning the favor of a German physician with a single kiss. This was bullshit. I have seen the scars on her body; she gave more than a kiss.

But despite what her body had suffered, she arrived in Dachau and gave us strangers her love. In Gen's eyes everyone was her mother, sister, cousin, daughter, aunt. She wanted to survive but she wanted you alive, too. After I had been trapped in the nightmare for so long, she made me believe in daylight again."

I closed my eyes in the sun. "Would you tell me about her?"

"We worked in a factory making uniforms for German troops. My hands were not so good. I cut my thumb, got an infection, and worked even worse. She stormed the supervisor's office and convinced him to save my

hand so I would not be put out of work. Whatever she did, Gen captivated him. She was thin but he made sure she never became a skeleton. He would give her gifts, an ounce of sausage and a piece of bread or stale pastry that she would sneak back to us.

Gen would not talk about the things he did to her and we did not ask. She told me, after the Americans came, he was found dead alongside several soldiers, torn to bits by machine gun fire.”

“Do you have his name?”

“Johannes. First or last, I don’t recall. You could search factory records, but many were destroyed. Gen would’ve remembered. She remembered everyone. Even in her final years she could tell you the names of the people who died and what the cause was, things I have forgotten though I too saw their bodies carried to the crematoria. She had an elephant’s love of her herd, and the capacity and tragedy of great memory.”

“Oh.”

As if she’d sensed my sadness, a hopeful tone entered her voice. “Your mother was not your grandfather's daughter, but he gave her a father’s love. He couldn’t have children, you see, but his bitterness disappeared the first time he held your mother. I did not believe anything in this world could have made him a happier man, then your mother had Rhetta and you.”

No matter its golden rays and bright intensity, the sun could not warm my cooling smile. I dabbed a tissue against my eyes and changed the subject, asking Elfrie about her impending grandchild and her life after the war. We'd talked a good half hour before she mentioned needing to change for dinner.

“One last, odd question before we go: did Grandma ever compare Warren to a wolf? Like a nickname or personality traits or anything? She had written a few letters that may have been to Gramps, but that’s my educated guess.”

“It’s a good one. His unit buddies called him the Second Wolf. When engaging the enemy, he would be the one to ambush or sneak behind enemy lines. Gen hated the nickname.”

Second Wolf. Second Head. Coincidence?

Sick to my stomach, I jotted down her address to send flowers, then gave a choked goodbye. Hanging up, I knew two things: one, I would find time to visit Elfrie in the Palmetto State. And two, the sheriff and his Otherworld connections stood a better chance of puzzling out the origins of Warren’s ring and finding my flesh and blood grandfather, Johannes.

I headed into the shed for gardening supplies. Armed with my new shovel, I threw on gloves and got to work uprooting weeds and damaged plants.

Footsteps echoed up the driveway. When I raised my head, Calico Finn leaned against my wheelbarrow. Mid-workout, dappled skin flush and glistening, she still managed to exhibit the collected poise of a dew-laden rose.

I wedged my spade into the soil beneath a dandelion. “Hey.”

“What are you doing down there on your hands and knees?”

“Practicing.”

She laughed. “Rough night?”

My bruised frown confirmed it. I stretched my legs onto the sidewalk and brushed mulch off my knees. “Can't say I've ever seen you running.”

“Safer than a jaunt through the woods right now.” She jiggled her thigh. “Hate to waste food, but what Aiden doesn't eat goes into my mouth.”

“Transformation doesn't burn the fat?”

She laughed. “There wouldn't be a human left unturned if that dieting secret were true. Transformation uses energy, but we need exercise, especially those of us who go long intervals between shifts. We don't change skin like clothes. It's risky and hurts.”

“The more wolf, the more painful the process?”

Cal flipped her ponytail. “Lieutenant Jali Mishra-Anderson of the CPA is so diluted she gets a sinus headache when she transitions from human nose to human super sniffer. Woe is she, suffering five minutes of nasal congestion in exchange for the ability to inconspicuously sniff out my brother's remains. Swear to God, watered-down mutts whine worse than full-blooded pups.”

I poured water for the two of us. Together we rested on the steps.

“You dunked me in hot water, Cal.” I glanced at my trash can, into which my lone bloody shoe had been shoved. “With the sheriff and Mina.”

“Ah, right.” She grimaced. “Mina interacts with humans so rarely, I forgot to tighten her leash.”

“Find it hard to believe she doesn't bump into humans.”

“She works out of her house running our finances, travels to Otherworld designated bars and keeps Otherworld friends. Sure, Mina can control herself at the gas station or in a restaurant, but humans bother her, let alone one linked to Stephen's murder.” The woman tapped manicured nails

against her glass. “I’m not the one to spill her beans, but talk to Mina before you judge her. She’s a sweet girl once you earn her trust. She could use a human perspective.” Calico broke into a grin. “Or sisterly, as the case may soon be.”

“Doubt wolfblood would change her attitude.”

“I’m begging you, sugar, show mercy. Imagine how Mina feels knowing Stephen’s pelt was sent to you, not us; she doesn’t get to mourn her brother or honor him the way he deserves.”

“Doesn’t excuse her rudeness.”

Cal studied the webs covering the lantern beside the door. “I was hoping pregnancy might quell her God-given rage. No such luck.”

I scraped peeling paint off the wood. “Don’t know him, but I’m beginning to suspect Jaz is a hobbyist stormchaser.”

Nodding, Cal tightened her sweaty ponytail. “Bless him for handling a hurricane. She’ll continue handling our finances, but she and her husband will leave us to form their own pack soon after the baby’s born.”

“Do packs split often?”

“A pack is as big or small as you make it, Marcy. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with size. Packs with fewer than ten members are considered independents. Any larger, the name becomes official and responsibility for the behavior of its members falls on the alphas. These packs, Talon being one of the largest, have membership dues but offer benefits, employment, etc.” She smiled. “We take care of one another. We’ll take care of you.”

A spider scuttled over the rail between us. “Swing by for an update on last night?” I asked.

“Talk is better than text.” Her eyes were red and puffy; I hadn’t noticed until now after she’d cooled. “You know Deb Fitzgerald? Her husband reported her missing after her shift ended.”

“Oh, shit.” Deb had reported the tall man in my yard the morning Stephen’s pelt had been displayed.

“The pack found her strung in the slaughterhouse. Headless, but there was no mistaking her canary diamond engagement ring. The monster skinned her and took the time to slide a twenty-thousand dollar ring back on.”

“Where was her head?”

Cal set down her glass. “Patience, sugar. I’m getting you there. Jaz called the CPA. We were told Sheriff Harlowe was unreachable, no surprise

considering who his hands were full of, so they sent Lieutenant Mishra-Anderson. You'd have an easier go of drawing a smile in a river than putting one on her face, so I left Jaz to mold that pile of wet cement and headed to the slaughterhouse with Evie to stand guard and chase any idiot ghost hunters or teens. Ten minutes had passed when the body's toes suddenly stretched for the ground and its sticky knees peeled apart like chunks of strawberry taffy. Threw up my rabbit. In the distance through the swamp we heard Deb scream. Her body started to writhe and claw at the hook protruding through her chest as if it were trying to run off and find its head. To see the sparkle of her ring as her nails bit into the fat of her breast? Fuck." Cal wiped her eyes. "Bad enough Stephen died, but if he suffered the same infernal torture? Fuck."

I squeezed her hand. "I'm so sorry, Cal."

"The night got worse before the CPA controlled the scene. I went to locate Deb's head in case humans overheard. Thought to end her misery. Followed her shrieks into the swamp and there I met Deb, motherfucking Queen of the Damned. Her head had been skewered on the stump of a lightning-struck oak. Whatever monster did this left the skin on her face. Her hair was braided into an updo and decorated in swamp flowers. A tiara of ferns had been pasted in the blood of her forehead. Her eyes were milky; I didn't think Deb saw me, but if she did, she never stopped screaming. More than once a serpentine wriggling brushed my belly as I steeled my nerves and approached. I couldn't bear to crush her skull in my teeth, so I nosed her into the swamp.

Reeds swayed and water lapped the stump. I scratched the bark to give it a fresh mark for Lieutenant Mishra-Anderson, when by random chance my snout caught a sour wind and a glimpse of something human-shaped and green-eyed crawling toward me through the moss."

The color drained from my face. "What'd you do?"

"Shit myself as I ran." She leaned out to examine the delicate strands of the spider's forming web. "Haven't told the pack what happened after I chummed the waters."

"Safe to assume you've heard about Metacomet?"

"We disagreed on who owned some double yellow lines, but they were good people." She stared at my living room window frame, where paint had peeled in a claw-like scratch. "What's happening, Marcy?"

My throat felt dry despite a swig of water. I remembered Lisa had

never bought beer as promised. “Too early for wine?”

“Almost too late. Be a long time before I dare raise a glass in the night,” she said with an eye toward the woods.

The sheriff's truck pulled into the driveway. He exited the truck, leaving the vehicle running. Calico pushed herself out of the porch's shade to intercept him at the walkway. Her right hand was balled in a tight fist. I ran after her.

“What were you thinking? You can't take a *human* into hostile territory, you asshole!”

To his credit, Caelan turned his head enough where Cal could pop his chin if she chose (she didn't), surveyed my property, and drawled, “This here's a right fine day, Mrs. Finn. Your neighbors sure have witnessed enough performances without us adding to the circus.”

Calico's head swung toward the other houses. Tension dropped from her shoulders. She set her hands on her hips and hissed through a polite smile, “She could have been killed!”

“She was safe. Miss Davins doesn't share Talon's rivals, yet.”

“Did you feel safe, Marcy, hun?” I couldn't get the words out fast enough. “The second you realized a necromancer was waiting, you should have dropped her somewhere zombie-free and called me.”

“I'm under no obligation to notify you of a non-pack member's whereabouts. In fact, I find myself surprised you didn't know where she'd gone trotting.”

Cal crossed her arms. “We're neighbors, not besties.”

The sheriff held up his cell. “Didn't sound so casual on your three voicemails this morning.”

Cal tapped her painted claws to her elbow. “Good neighbors are hard to replace.”

“As are museum paintings.”

I eased between the thief and the lawman. “Like my feline companions, I go as I please when I please.” I flashed both werewolves a smile. “What can I help you with, sheriff?”

“We've got a lead, *partner*,” he announced, amber eyes focused on Calico. He waited patiently, that is to say, with the proud delight of a kid who'd tablespooned baking soda into a paper-mache volcano.

Her head whipped around. The flush returned to the alpha's cheeks. “You can't!”

Caelan dropped his arm over my shoulders. “Already ran it past Belzer—Thomas Belzer, Otherworld’s chief PR manager, my near but less than dear handler, Marcy. Expect an article to be released after the investigation on human cooperation and the retention of classified information. Change is in the air, Mrs. Finn.”

The woman’s dark eyes narrowed. “She’ll be slaughtered.”

“Miss Davins is free to do whatever pleases her.” Caelan must’ve read my expression, because his smile widened when our eyes met. “I for one am looking forward to working with her.”

An annoyed Calico shouldered past him. “I’ve gotta run. Nice talking to you, Marcy.”

Nodding at Caelan to stay (was it insulting to werewolves to use commands referencing dogs, even if I’d say the same to a human?), I caught her as she stormed past our mailbox. “Cal, hey, wait! Be careful, alright? Whatever’s out there is after me. It’s personal.”

She frowned. “How do you know?”

I glanced at the sheriff, who was standing beside the passenger side door.

“Later. For now, watch your pack.” I headed for Caelan.

Hand to his lips, the sheriff pointed toward a moon-faced girl in the backseat. A damp, starry blanket was tucked to her chin. Her face was red, her blonde hair stuck to her cheeks in the throes of having cried herself to sleep. In all the clamor of spring, my startled peep of a gasp awoke her.

“Marcy, this is Mila. Mila, this is Marcy, one of my deputies.”

“Nice to meet you, Mila,” I said, raising my eyebrows at the sheriff.

“Marcy’s going to sit back here with you today, alright?”

She nodded.

“We’ll be a minute more.” Caelan closed the door so she couldn’t hear. “No guardian clause in the will. Nearest family’s an aunt in Anaheim. Non-Were. Hospitalized three times in the past year for opioid overdoses. No contact with Mila’s parents in years. Girl’s got to stay with someone a couple days until the Otherworld’s foster society sends their rep to retrieve her. Promised you I’d see to her, so, here we are.”

“And you’re planning on what, providing her a pillow and a moving box?”

“Corporal Seffa can take her. She’s got two at home already. However, Belzer believes it’d be good PR to let you care for her.”

I took a step back. “Isn’t that dangerous?”

“We’ll ensure you’re protected. When she learns what’s happened, Mrs. Finn will see to the same.”

“If I refuse?”

“There are hills with better views to die on, Marcy. The Otherworld won’t play fair or easy. They’re confident the presence of the kid will hasten your death, turning you into another tragic reason why humans cannot exist within the Society.”

“I find it difficult to believe that in less than twenty-four hours they took the time to hear out an insignificant human’s request, let alone come up with a PR plan.”

“I’ve been trying to get humans permitted a long time,” he said. “Best I’ve been able to do is disappear the ones who choose to run, and everyone who chooses humanity has run,” he added, raising his eyebrows.

“Not doing it,” I said.

“Plenty of time to change your mind,” he replied. “The Society and I have had a tentative agreement in place a while: *if* I found the right human, I could pull them into my department as an experiment. I think you’re the one,” he said, rubbing his shirt collar.

“Sounds like I’m the only one.”

“I’ll introduce you to my team this morning,” he continued, glancing at his phone. “Appreciate if you would rush on and gather your things. We’re busy as all get-out today. A ‘wolf’ killed three patients inside a hospital, all registered Weres.”

“What about her?” I thumbed to the backseat. The girl had her knees pulled to her chest and turned her head away.

“Child care center attached to the hospital. She’ll stay there while we’re otherwise occupied.”

James had been dying. He was dying.

As I climbed beside his sister, I thought of the many ways I’d failed them.

chapter 18

OBSERVATIONS

Mila was three years old, recently put into preschool, and terrified. The rumble of the highway and steady radio crackle lulled her to sleep as we drove. Careful not to disturb her, I leaned forward for a hushed conversation with Caelan.

“What does she know?”

“They’re gone.” He observed her through the rear-view mirror. “Didn't specify by who.”

“Don't. No need to traumatize her by telling her she's stuck with the person responsible.” An NBC News van sped along the left lane. “What angle you guys go with?”

“Cult lead by Ingram Hayes blocked the roads and slaughtered any and all Stag Hill residents trapped inside. If you’re asked, we believe he and his followers are worshipping a god of the end times.”

“What’s he like?”

“Mr. Hayes spent childhood working as a magician’s assistant in his family’s now-defunct circus. His mother practiced a gentler form of voodoo. Down on their luck, he used his knowledge from her and skills as an assistant to make a religious figure of himself, but the powerful factions mocked him as a child capable of mere parlor tricks. He lost the few sheep he had, went to college and got a job as a musical therapist. His life is a walk through sludge from then on.” He looked over his shoulder at me. “How were your dreams?”

“Quiet.”

“Not surprised. L’enfer Requins has been busy. Your dreams confirm my team’s suspicions: Ingram’s revenge-minded, musically gifted, but incapable of orchestrating chaos on this scale. He’s the face of the movement, not it’s brains.”

“How do my dreams factor into the equation?”

“Even the most powerful necromancer can’t invade the mind of the living. Ingram may have started out in control, but the thing addressing you calls the shots these days. It ain’t following all the standard rules of demonic activity, but it appears to require a host. You mentioned the face is always changing... Might could be you’re viewing its hosts.”

I blanched. “Keith was in that group. You don’t think he has something to do with this, do you?”

“I’ll ask a corporal to pay him a visit. Still got his plate, but if you would kindly provide his full name and address, we can move on this faster.”

Asleep, Mila's arm slid from her knees and brushed mine. I tucked the blanket around her shoulders. “What’s the opinion of the Otherworld at large?”

“Cautious and aware of the situation. CPA’s received dozens of missing person reports and hundreds of tips and potential sightings since this morning. Then word of the hospital incident reached our office. One missing, three dead, no bodies. Been a shitshow.”

We pulled into the hospital’s visitor lot not five minutes later. I unbuckled Mila and carried her in my arms. With a flash of his badge and a hand on my back, the sheriff guided us through the throng of bystanders and concerned families. The crowd had scared the girl and she was crying, but inside, the main floor was quiet and sterile, manned by an overwhelmed receptionist and security team. A quick word at the desk and we’d contacted the temporary sitter. I wasn’t sure who I felt worse for: Mila, or the poor aide charged with the confused pup. Reality probably hadn’t even sunk in yet.

Caelan and I walked beyond a cheery gift shop, over a dingy, suspiciously stained carpet and onto an elevator.

“Gram hated hospitals,” I told the sheriff, backing into a glossy aluminum corner. “Refused to go for her or my own good. Freshman year of college, Lisa and I got drunk over Thanksgiving break and took our boyfriends ghost hunting. I broke my wrist falling through the roof of the slaughterhouse.”

“Graceful.”

“I was fun back then.”

“Reckon you still are,” he replied. “What’d your grandmother do?”

“After sending everyone home, must’ve whipped Tommy good because he left me the night we got back on campus, Gram broke into a

physician's house in the middle of the night." I paused. "My brain's working to turn coincidence into pattern, but this doc had the most stunning green eyes. I was shit-faced, but still remember thinking, 'Wow, I could die happy gazing into his eyes every night.' Then he asked how old I was. When Gram slapped him I realized I'd been thinking out loud."

"Do you have his name?"

"Nope. Never saw him since or I'd have died of embarrassment." On the floor between our feet was a squished, browned daisy. I scuffed it. "In the end, once her lungs got bad, I carried Gram into Hartford Hospital. She was too weak to fight, but she tried, tried so hard to get away we caused a scene in the parking garage. I almost gave in, but I couldn't do it: I couldn't let her go. So instead of dying peacefully at home, she died miserable and asking to go home. Haven't set foot inside a hospital since."

The elevator dinged and whooshed open.

A doctor with a faded scar across her cheek greeted us. She dabbed a tissue to her red eyes.

"Dr. Rachel Walker," she said in a brusque voice. Her attention settled on my taller, badge-toting companion, who offered his hand. "Thanks for meeting me away from the scene."

"Not a problem, Dr. Walker. Investigating this case with me is my deputy, Marcy Davins."

Fanning her neck, Dr. Walker frowned at my dirt-tinted knees.

"Needless to say," Caelan continued, clasping my shoulder, "came soon as we heard."

"Yes, well . . ." The woman's voice faded. Color fled her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered.

The sheriff's grip switched from her palm to her elbow as her knees buckled. "Ease on down, Doc. I've got you."

Dr. Walker dropped her head between her knees and was content to squeeze the sheriff's hand. At last, with a trembling hand she brushed sweaty brunette curls away from her neck. Pale scars puckered the skin and plunged out of sight beneath the coat.

It was so faint I couldn't be certain, but it appeared to be some kind of faded bite.

She pulled a tissue from her coat pocket and wiped her nose. "Noah wasn't even supposed to be on."

"Who's Noah?" I asked.

She didn't seem to hear. "We were going on our first date last night, but one of my patients coded. I stayed. He took a double shift and we made a dinner-date in the cafeteria. We've been friends fifteen years. Fifteen years and one shitty divorce later, I pluck up the courage to ask him out and he's gone. Held his hand five minutes and he's gone!"

"You're safe," Caelan said in a low, reassuring tone. He dropped a hand on her shoulder. "Noah put himself between you and the animal to keep you safe. We need to catch this beast before harm comes to more of Bayberry's innocents. I wouldn't ask this of you if I believed you weren't capable, Dr. Walker. What you share will save lives."

Caelan sent me for coffee. By the time I'd returned, balancing three cups of lukewarm vending machine 'coffee', he had settled her into a desk chair. He'd rolled a seat for himself beside her, one hand resting on hers. Unsure what to do, I perched on the desk to watch him work.

"As I'm to understand, you're an attending physician?" he asked. A small notebook lay ready on his lap with a pen shoved into the spiral binding.

"Yes."

"One down, a few to go, Doc."

She passed a shaky smile over her cup.

"Where was the animal first seen?"

"302C, Elliot Foster's room. End of the hall, first door by the rear staircase."

"And where is Mr. Foster now?"

She shrugged.

He tried again. "What was he hospitalized for?"

"Admitted into the ER vomiting and dehydrated. High fever, muscle aches, fatigue. Flu peaked in late January, but it isn't unusual for cases to continue through May." At Caelan's gentle touch she carried on. "He experienced difficulty breathing and minor chest pain. We kept him overnight for observation. He's in his late sixties. Lives alone. History of heart issues. We wanted to be sure."

"Elliot's name didn't appear on the list of fatalities. He the gentleman y'all claimed disappeared during the evacuation?"

"Blood and tissue soaked his sheets; if he wasn't eaten, we assume he escaped in the chaos wounded and disoriented."

"Takes a large animal to devour an entire man." The sheriff studied her expression. From the fear in her eyes, there was no doubt such a wolf had

passed. “Our canine unit, finest noses in the department, are searching the woods behind the parking garage as we speak. If he’s there, we’ll find him.”

I wondered if his statement included Lieutenant Mishra-Anderson.

“Could you please describe the animal for us, Doc?”

“It’s a wolf,” she snapped. “I don’t care what Fish and Game says. They’re here, same as cougars. My father owned a pest control company. Growing up, I helped him catch coyotes and nuisance animals. I know wolves from coyotes. This you’d mistake for a black bear.” She set the coffee on the desk and dropped her hands in her lap. “This is going to sound stupid, but the animal smelled of ocean debris and was wearing a necklace.”

I raised my eyebrows. Meanwhile, Caelan worked his magic, smoothing over her concerns as his pen clicked into action.

“What kind of necklace?” I asked when she seemed comfortable.

“It’s on the video.”

“Sure would help to know what the grainy specks of footage are supposed to resemble. Could make the difference between sending Deputy Davins searching for a cat or dog shaped tag.”

Her coffee trembled. Her gaze tipped toward the ceiling as she thought. “Maybe it wasn’t a necklace. It was this, this dirty tweed pouch on a leather cord? Dripping wet.”

Caelan frowned. “Blood or water?”

“The wolf moved too fast to tell.”

“How do you believe the animal entered the hospital?”

She laughed, cold and joyless. “I know it left by standing on its hind legs and pushing open the fire exit. Perhaps it used the elevator.”

“So ‘unknown.’ Thank you. Now’s the hard part, Rachel.”

Caelan lifted his eyebrows. On cue, I stretched across the desk and tossed him a box of tissues, which, judging by the ruddy discoloration on the cardboard, had come down from the third floor with the doctor.

The doctor tipped so far back in her chair Caelan’s hand waited at the rear in case she toppled.

“You’ll need to describe what happened, Doc.”

“I know.”

“Take your time.” Caelan smiled and rose. “Please excuse us a moment. I’ve got to check in with the team.”

Huddling over her box of tissues, she was more than relieved to excuse us. The sheriff dragged me into the nearest unoccupied room.

“What’s up?” I asked.

Passing me his notebook, he frowned. “Are you a deputy or a mouse?”

“Neither?”

“Talk with her how you talked with James. I’ll be right back.” He pushed me gently forward. With a pleading look back, I returned beside Dr. Walker. The next time I saw him, he was halfway to the elevator.

Concern knit Rachel’s brow. She sat up, alarmed. “Where’s the sheriff going?”

Settling into his seat, I flipped open the notebook to find handwriting leagues neater than my own and a wolf-shaped smiley (artist he was not) barking a speech bubble of, ‘Be Marcy!’

“Went to examine the scene,” I guessed, thumbing the doodle in an effort to delay the inevitable. I’d pulled information out of James and shot him in the head. I felt sick, horrible and disgusted with myself as I asked, “You ready?”

She buried her face in her hands. “Goddammit, check the tapes.”

How would Caelan have done this? I studied again her neck, revised my attempt. “Do you have pets, Rachel?”

Tension eased from her shoulders. “What?”

“When I was younger a rabid coyote got into our house.” I closed the notebook and turned my palm open to her teary gaze, indicating the thin scars where Rhetta had clung. “My sister saved my life at the cost of her own. She also saved our kitten, Samson. Now, when I’m nervous, I seek Samson out, hug him, and count until the fear passes. It’s true, what Sheriff Harlowe says: you are safe.” I took her hand. “We’re both safe because of brave people. But some nights, nothing calms me better than Samson’s purrs. Do you have a pet or someone to stay with tonight?”

With her free hand she ripped tissues from the box and dabbed her eyes. “I’m divorced. I don’t have pets, what with being at the hospital more than I am home.” Her hand trembled in mine. “You lost your sister?”

“Years later, I still find it difficult to talk about it.” I withdrew my hand, brushing my knuckles against my throat. “I don’t mean to pry, but your neck, were you also . . . ?”

She brushed her hair out of her eyes. “Yeah. We lived in Waterbury. Our neighbor was a backyard breeder of pitbulls. Piece of garbage human being. The dogs were horribly inbred, chained, beaten, taught to bite anything

within range of their teeth. One day, the male dug under the fence separating our backyards. I was swinging when he jumped from behind . . .”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “For now and then.”

“I’m okay,” she mumbled, drawing a rattled breath. “When I saw the wolf’s red gaping maw close around Alicia’s arm, I froze. If it weren’t for Noah, I would’ve been next crushed in its teeth. It knocked him across my legs and sprang on his chest. I saw the panic in his eyes as the animal clawed open his ribcage. Noah was pleading and grabbing my pants and I kicked away... I loved that man and I kicked him in the head to run away.”

“He wanted you to live, Rachel,” I said, closing the notebook and studying a nurse’s schedule in a vain attempt at blocking my own memories. “He might have been scared in the moment, but he made the sacrifice necessary to get you away, no matter what it took. You did what you had to do, and in doing so, he didn’t die in vain.”

Dr. Walker’s coherency dissolved into tears and tissues. I sat beside her, rubbing her back, asking small questions, until the sheriff returned, dismissing Rachel and calling me to view the security footage.

“Hospital has cameras for the unit floors. Individual rooms get them if there is a special need concerning a patient. Nothing special about an old man who forgot to take water with his pills.”

Our replay assistant slumped into the security officer's chair. The guy was young, carried himself with boundless, fresh-out-of-college optimism, and smelled like his lean little frame had been carved from a stick of deodorant. One of Caelan's lot, I realized after he tried to fist bump the sheriff with a friendly, “Hey, bossman!”

Unsurprisingly, the sheriff ignored him in favor of the monitor.

“Audio's shit,” the tech added, turning his fist to me with a hopeful grin.

Feeling obligated, I bumped him back.

“So you shot the sheriff,” he continued, running the same hand through his dark curls. “Impressive. Name's Jorge.”

“Oh, the yogurt thief!” I said with more excitement than intended. “Nice to meet you! I’m Marcy.”

Flinging up his arms, Jorge swiveled in his chair to turn a look of horror upon his boss. “Dude!”

“Miss Davins is our teammate,” he said stiffly. “Off-limits from your tomcatting.”

Jorge pointed at me. “Off-limits *temporarily*.” A more accusing jab toward Caelan. “Wingman, all day, every day. You were supposed to talk me up on the ride over. You made her sound perfect.”

I bounced on my heels with a jolt of nervous energy. “He did?”

Caelan’s amber eyes remained trained on empty hall footage. “Can’t paint the first human in our department in a negative light.”

I tapped the notebook in his hand. “Don’t think you can paint a bat in a cave, sir.”

“I know, right?” Jorge wheeled closer. “Learn from my mistake, Marcy: never volunteer for his Pictionary team. I’d blame his primitive genes but even cavemen show talent.”

Caelan ruffled Jorge’s hair on his way past. “Wednesday ain’t far, Piglet.”

Jorge groaned. “Aw, no, not in front of Marcy, man.”

“What happens Wednesday?” I asked, curious.

“He drags one of us to the boxing club. This is my week to face the music.”

“Could I come?” With a face flush with mischief, I announced to the sheriff, “I could use the cardio.”

“Great workout,” the sheriff agreed through an impassive expression and a rub of his jaw. “Reckon I could let this here ham scamper on home to his pigsty if you’d like to go a few rounds.”

“That alright, Jorge?”

“Please! Look at these hooves, girlfriend.” Jorge set his skinny fingers on the armrest. “Silky-smooth. Unlike my barbarian compatriot, I’m a lover, not a fighter. Hence my, uh, office nickname.”

Instantly I pointed at Caelan. “Oh, tell me his.”

The sheriff raised a finger. “Don’t you—”

Jorge grinned. “Big Spoon.” He got out a victorious, “*Ha!*” before Caelan gently whacked the back of his head with the notebook.

“Piglet and Big Spoon,” I said, unable to contain myself. “I’ve gotta hear this story.”

“Yeah, see, we working this investigation together when—”

A bit rosy in the cheeks, Caelan spun the younger man toward the screens. “I’m fixin’ to leave here before sunset.”

“Sorry, boss.” Jorge fast-forwarded the video. Ticking seconds became flashing minutes. With the back of a ballpoint, he circled door 302C by the stairs. “Bed’s out of frame. No one in or out of the room except the deceased nurse in the hour prior to the event.”

Caelan let me step in front of him for a better view of the changing cameras and angles. Together we watched the scene unfold.

The corridor is empty until a female patient enters, limping and wheeling a racked IV drip. Dr. Walker and a pair of nurses, Noah and Alicia, rise from the nurse's station to greet her. They talk, then the doctor leaves with Noah. Alicia, a mother of two who'd recently earned her Masters of Science in Nursing—according to Rachel—walks alongside the IV patient before disappearing into a room two doors from Elliot Foster's.

The patient continues her limp around the unit.

A few steps before Elliot's doorway, her head turns, posture tenses.

A chair flies across the linoleum and crashes into the far wall.

Jorge changed the camera to one cornered against the wall, the better to observe the fleeing woman.

The audio garbles her screams. She swings inside the nearest door, but her IV rack catches the molding, sending her to the floor with a metallic crash.

Bursts of static yield to deep, off-tune laughter. Fangs sever the darkness of Elliot's doorway. The wolf emerges, guard hairs crusted with sea salt, and turns toad-like eyes to the camera as if it knows I'm watching. My name rolls soft off a lover's tongue, and with a gentle touch at my hip goosebumps sparked from my arms to my legs.

My fault: in a heightened state of awareness, I’d inadvertently backed into Caelan.

“Sorry,” I whispered, without moving away.

“It’s fine. You’re fine,” the man murmured against my hair. The low timbre of his voice crackled with such heavy warmth I knew without a doubt his control was a match burning down.

The wolf prowls on. Its ears curl, the breadth of its muzzle is narrow, the protruding teeth crammed and crooked needles. The paws, if they can be called such, resemble clawed fingers fused together, humanoid but noticeably webbed when the animal wrenches the rack off the fallen woman.

Alicia emerges. Her back is to the camera, but the certain terror on her face as the wolf leaps is better left unrecorded. Less than a minute later, both women lay dead in its wake.

The wolf noses closed doors and investigates opened ones, takes a whiff and passes by, a drowned harbinger of death. And there ahead, huddled in a ball on the empty floor, sat Rachel. Behind her, trying to pull her upright to the safety of the elevator, was Noah.

Jorge paused the feed.

Caelan immediately stepped back from me.

“Nurse gets mauled,” Jorge began. “Turns to the doctor when a sand flea jumps in its ear or something and it sits to scratch. As the doctor watches, the dead stumble upright and exit via the backstairs. Wolf follows. Doc follows wolf initially, but freaks out at whatever she sees and returns to the unit. Security arrives late due to an elevator malfunction. As they enter the ward, a man loads the wolf and walking dead into an unmarked van in the rear parking lot. The end.”

Caelan’s bright eyes met mine. “Thoughts, Miss Davins?”

“Elliot’s the werewolf.”

“Correct.”

“What kind was he?”

The sheriff gestured to the indistinct blotch around the wolf’s neck. “It’s more a question of what he was wearing.”

“Eau-de-Zombae.” Jorge folded his hands across his stomach, spinning in his chair. “Necros make minions how some of us build stuffed animals. Ingram’s been using cursed objects to corrupt a person’s final transformation into their wolfskin. He loves making these fugly, water-logged sons of bitches.”

“Moneymakers,” Caelan added.

“Yeah, Marcy, sick stuff. There’s people out there who’ll pay piles of cash to get their freak on with a werewoman sporting tentacle hair, among the lesser nightmare fuel I’ve seen on tape. Speaking of, what do you want to see next?”

The sheriff pointed at the second screen. “Check the—”

“I’m asking Marcy what she wants,” Jorge corrected with a wink my way. “Sorry, boss. You’re a piece of paradise and all, but she’s prettier by a country mile. What would you like, Marcy? Lead us on our investigation.”

I glanced at Caelan.

The sheriff offered a one-shouldered shrug. “Ladies first.”

With no idea what to do, I defaulted to the obvious. “Have you reviewed the footage from the time Elliot arrives at the hospital until the attack?”

“We’ll want to see who comes, goes, and interacts with him. Great.” Jorge gave me a tiny clap of approval. “Could use another set of eyes on this, and Big Spoon here claims yours are pretty good with detail. Plus, it’s almost lunch. You wanna grab a bite and dive in?”

Caelan frowned—“I believe Miss Davins may already have lunch plans.”—but from the tilt of his head and raised eyebrows, it was clear the statement was a quiet invitation.

“Yeah, sorry, I’m booked,” I said, and experienced a pleasant echo of the happiness that lit the sheriff’s face.

chapter 19

EXPERIENCE

Elliot Foster encountered several people at the hospital yesterday morning, but it didn't take long to crown an evident and obvious champion of suspicion.

On the monitor, a tall, dark skinned man in black robes walked from door to door on the third floor. A cross swung from his neck. In his left hand he gripped a vintage floral carpet bag. One of the dayshift nurses confronted him, but not until after he'd spent ten minutes with Elliot.

The dayshift nurse, a brunette by the name of Leona, was working on patient transfers when Caelan and I stopped her after lunch for a brief interview while we awaited Mila's return.

"Snuck in as a soft-spoken French pastor and peddled religious icons," she told us. "Rosaries, prayer beads, dream catchers, feathers painted with animals and an assortment of oddball tokens. None of my patients or their families bought any. I talked to him after a woman complained about her mother being bothered."

"Cameras never caught his face. Could you please describe him for us?" I asked, feeling more confident after Jorge and Caelan had humored my various footage requests (neither of them heard the laughter, and I didn't either on the next replay, which troubled the sheriff far more than his friend, who reasoned I heard someone in the hall).

"He'd scratched the back of his left hand raw. I'd say that's what made my inner alarm ring, but the way he stood...he would go completely unblinking still. You'd think a man his size, when he got to rolling it'd be a crawl, but his gestures were quick, short, and precise. Reminded me of a spider, and worse, the minute I took my eyes off him to call security, he disappeared."

“What can you tell us about his facial features?”

“Narrow chin, high cheek bones. Skeletal. Hazel eyes, not near as kind as our sheriff’s.”

The man flashed her a polite smile, but his focus was all business as he displayed Ingram Hayes’ college ID on his phone and asked if this was the man.

She tapped the screen. “My mother used to say dimples come from angel kisses. He must’ve gotten a big smooch! And his smile, oh, wow, that changed! Knowing this is what he was makes me feel as if I’d met a corpse. If you’d been close enough to experience the stench oozing past his lips, you’d feel the same.” She held the phone closer. “Yep, what a sorry change. Can’t believe he’d ruin such a nice smile.”

“Ruin how?”

“His teeth were pointed.”

“Like a vampire’s?”

Shaking his head, Caelan stepped lightly on my toe.

Leona ran a finger along her gum line. “No, every tooth. Once he’d caught me staring, he talked more softly so as not to open his mouth wide. Made him near impossible to understand, and I did not want to move closer to hear him better.”

Caelan explained how Mr. Hayes was a dangerous cult leader responsible for the massacre in Avon and stressed how lucky Leona had been (and should she announce her encounter to the press, Mr. Hayes or his fanatics would see to it her luck was drained drier than a desert creek).

“Is there anything else you can tell us? Which organization he claimed to work for, where he's from . . . ?” I prompted, eager to redeem myself after the vampire slip.

She shrugged. “Hospitals admit his sort now and again. He’s one of them strange fellows you want forgotten before you’re alone in the parking lot, you know?”

Caelan made her an appointment with a sketch artist at the local police station then let her return to work. When he finished writing his thoughts, I plucked the pen from his grasp.

He was more intrigued than annoyed as I scrawled 'Warren Benjamin - 1940s' across the top of a separate page and passed it back.

“Case-related?”

“My grandmother’s husband. Was part of the Allied troops to take

Dachau.” From my worried expression, Caelan knew better than to press the matter in public. “Similar voice to James.”

“Consider it done,” he promised, sliding the pen into the binding. “My team and I have a fair few more interviews to conduct. Get Mila out of here. Pup deserves a more comfortable environment to settle in.” He fished the truck keys out of his pocket and forty bucks from his wallet. “Buy her a stuffed animal, an ice cream or whatever makes kids her age happy for a minute. I’ll commandeer a vehicle and meet you at your residence later this evening.”

“To do what?”

We were alone to the side of the hospital lobby and leaned together conspiratorially and still his voice dropped. “Listen, Marcy. To me, you are uncharted waters. It’s my own damn fault if I drown, but adding a child into the mix makes me nervous than a cat in a room of rockers.”

“Think she’ll be safe?”

“Can you rustle up your watch dogs for tonight?”

“Probably.”

“Then y’all will be fine.”

“Like Metacomet was fine?” I studied his face. His eyes were intelligent and focused, but held a tiredness as he turned toward the whoosh of the automatic doors at the entrance. “I’ve got two bedrooms what with Lisa camping at her fiancé’s until they find an apartment in New York. Stay with me.”

“I’ll take that under consideration, Miss Davins,” the sheriff rumbled, playing with his pen as a woman sidled over and asked to borrow her boss. “I’d like you to meet Lieutenant Mishra-Anderson.”

“Jali,” the woman extended her hand with a guarded smile. I recognized her as the officer Caelan had sent to intercept Tammy at the discovery of Stephen’s pelt. She was a petite woman, reserved in tone and nature. Unlike Jorge, she didn’t have a spare word for pleasantries and simply whisked her boss away to inform him of her findings.

Rather than wait, I went in search of Mila. When I retrieved her from the grateful aide, Mila explained hand-holding was for babies, but nevertheless squeezed the life out of my fingertips as we browsed the hospital gift shop.

“My ear hurts,” she announced.

I crouched to examine her earring: a silver stud punched through the

left lobe. Whether red skin resulted from infection, constant tugging, or normal werewolf reactions, Caelan or Calico would have to answer.

“Can I take it off?”

“Not here.”

She thrust her bottom lip into an exaggerated pout. “It hurts.”

I smoothed her ponytail. “I know, but there’s too many humans.”

Moody, she flipped through coloring books as I glanced at cards and well-wishing balloons. I needed a book on coping to better help her, but in the meantime, what was the appropriate choice of gift for a grieving child? Gram had barely discussed death with me. Hush up, be quiet, grieve on your own, smile pretty for the realtor giving us a tour or there’ll be questions. Questions were always right around the corner. Someone was always watching.

I squished my anxiety into an exorbitantly priced stuffed giraffe. “How about him?”

“No.”

Relieved, I danced a medium-sized teddy across the display. “Her?”

“No.”

Candy, books, magazines, card games . . . A firm, resounding “no” every time. Freaking Aiden all over again.

I’d volunteered at dozens of the museum’s free for families events, (wrongly) thinking I was great with kids. They had been welcoming and compliant because they’d wanted more paint, string, or whatever the medium of the month was so they could enhance their interpretive masterpiece.

Mila needed a distraction of her own design.

“Alright,” I decided, clapping my hands. New tactic. “It’s settled. We’ll give this money to Klimt, my . . .” I chewed my lip, pulled animal shapes together from a row of figurines. “Waldorpus. He’ll know what to do.”

Her ponytail whipped my arm, she turned so quick. “A what?”

My mouth fell open in feigned surprise. “You’ve never heard of a Waldorpus?”

She shook her head.

I made a show pulling her into a corner. “Waldorpi are secret guardian spirits that protect you from harm. They live under beds. Sometimes you hear them growling, when they’re fighting the nasty Scritchies and Scratchies.”

She let out a soft huff and folded her arms across her unicorn shirt.

“Are you for real, Deputy Davins?”

“Cross my heart. Klimt’s right here.” I pointed to my shoulder. “They’re invisible in the daylight, but sometimes if you squint real hard, you can see their shadow. Klimt says yours is right there.” I pointed at the top of her head. “Thing is, Waldorpi won’t appear unless you name them.”

Her hands rose above her hair tie. “Here?”

“Is it a boy or a girl?” I continued. “I can’t tell.”

She squinted in the shop’s glass door. “A girl,” she decided. “What’s she look like?”

“You tell me. She’ll reveal herself when you name her. I’m gonna ask you some questions, and you tell me the answers and we’ll draw her together, okay?”

In the end, we bought colored pencils and a fuzzy horse diary to sketch in.

Over warm cookies at the cafeteria, I practiced my interrogation skills and Mila instructed me on Snowmane’s appearance. Doodling relaxed me as much as it did her. I had to admit, I did a fair job at capturing the essence of the mighty Waldorpus. The result was a blue horse with a rhino horn, a white mane of glitter and the stripes and rear end of a tiger. And maybe the front paws, too. Mila needed to squint harder but her eyes were too tired.

We popped into the grocery store to buy ingredients for dinner: SpongeBob mac & cheese and frozen corn (rookie mistake, letting a kid pick the entrée and ‘vegetable’). She was in such good spirits, telling me about all the times, now that she thought about it, Snowmane had helped her, I felt alright adding a stop to Jo-Ann’s Fabrics before we picked up Igor and Samson.

Lisa and Wyatt seemed befuddled by our cancellation of plans and even more by the girl’s quiet presence. When I brought the cat carriers to the car and buckled Mila in, the look they exchanged was a worried one. Short of promising to explain later, there was nothing I could do to ease their minds.

But when the cats were free and eluding Mila’s grabby hands, I set a pot of water on the stove and took my chance to relax. The contractor had installed a new door and fixed my wall. I’d be swatting flies and crawling insects for days, but the situation was a vast improvement. Home felt like home again, apart from the werewolf officers stationed outside.

As the sun sank into the greedy claws of rotting swamp maples, I reached for my cell to ask Cal about Mila’s earring dilemma and obtaining an

extra un-imaginary guardian for this evening.

One missed call. Unknown number. New voicemail.

Shit, had I forgotten to pay the water bill? I pressed play.

“Of all the names out there, Gen chose Marcy for you? My God, it’s a wonder you haven’t changed it now she’s gone. The name’s Ronan Delevant. Your grandmother and I hunted big game together. Gen left me your number in case of emergencies. Shit, am I glad you’ve still got it considering I never bothered confirming the line. Already two years since she passed? Time flies on a falcon, don’t it?”

He gave a jumbled number I had to listen to three times before understanding.

“Please, this is a matter of grave importance. Thank you.”

I listened a fourth and fifth rewind. Rusted, Downeast Maine accent, rough as the Atlantic and tart. Older gentlemen, voice possibly aged by smoking, drinking, and other Saturday night indulgences. Preparing myself, I dumped two boxes of pasta into the now-boiling pot and dialed Ronan’s number.

The same gruff voice greeted me.

“You called this number earlier today asking after Marcy.”

“Should’ve called back while I was sober.” He paused. “You her?”

“I am.”

“Got proof?”

“You called me.”

“So?”

Phone pressed to my ear, I gave the macaroni a thoughtful stir. Mila thumped downstairs chasing two shadows. Until she was out of my care, a white lie wouldn’t hurt. “Look, I’ve got a kid. If her life is in danger, I need to know.”

A door creaked on his end of the line. Wind rose in ghoulish howls. “If you’re still alive Sunday, give me a ring.”

The sheriff buzzed the doorbell as I spooned macaroni onto plates. Balancing a thin manila file folder on the staircase rail, he held up Mila’s

blanket.

“Forgot this in the backseat,” he explained.

No other vehicle in the driveway. I wondered who’d brought him and what he’d told them and the officers he’d dismissed at my new door, then the sheriff walked through and had my full attention. He had changed his shirt to a grey button-down paired with a vest and dark jeans. He’d also showered, unlike the animal I was, I thought, hoping 24-hour deodorant lasted as advertised.

Eying the leather overnight bag slung over his shoulder, I asked, “Wolf kit?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, I washed your clothes that I borrowed so you’ll be comfy for bed. If you plan on freeballing like your four-legged brethren, you won’t be next to me.”

“Wouldn’t be next to you, no,” he agreed with a teasing smile. “Rest assured, Miss Davins. I’m well-behaved.”

“Good.” I set Mila’s blanket on the railing beside the folder. “I have a feeling this kid might crawl into my bed tonight when the world’s gone quiet and she processes what happened. When I lost my family, even though I heard their screams and was carried past their bodies, those first couple days felt like some demented vacation they forgot to take me on. I kept waiting up for Mom and Dad to kiss me goodnight and would roll to my right as if Rhetta were there to plan our next day’s adventures. Took a while to understand the meaning of ‘never.’ It was always at night, in my bed, cot, or sleeping bag, depending on where we were staying, when I felt most lonely.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Was a real slip of the tongue when we met: I am indeed a mess.” We walked into the kitchen together. “Has your corporal reached out to Keith?”

“Wasn’t home. We’ll try again.”

“Hope he’s alright,” I continued. “He wasn’t for me, but he’s a nice guy. Well-educated, good job, knows what he wants in life, ready for a serious relationship. I could drown you in his accolades.”

“Spend my life toiling far below the harps and halos, Miss Davins.” The sheriff lifted a hand. “Please spare me the praise for a man from on high.”

“Will do.” I busied myself opening a fresh roll of paper towels. “Thing is, I never could get past a couple dates with anyone. I’d rather live

alone than lie through my teeth forever about who I am. But everyone's dead now. If I broadcast my story, minus the werewolf, would that generate enough publicity to keep me alive?"

"Your grandmother was right to stress the importance of remaining undercover. You draw attention to the Otherworld's crime scenes, you'll be silenced." He indicated a picture above the table of a twelve year old Marcy frosting a birthday cake for Gram. "Sometimes I wish I had family photos. Weaned and off with my new masters I trotted. When I was twenty-two, I met my older brother for the first time. From then on, I'm glad we don't have any."

I whistled. "Long time."

"He's the sheriff of Louisiana. You'll soon have the misfortune of shaking his hairy hand." Caelan sneezed and gave the underside of the table a suspicious frown.

"Unlike some people, Mila loves cats. I might try Samson in with her tonight."

"Knew I was right popping an allergy pill." He waved his file at the colorful fabric and stuffing mounded on my counter. "Who's childhood did you murder?"

"I'm crafting Mila her own Waldorpus."

He tilted his head, but I shook mine and shouted for my temporary ward to come eat.

"Make yourself comfortable, Caelan. While you're here, I'd like to press you for a favor. My grandmother's sewing machine is in the basement. Not heavy, but it's bolted to a table so it's awkward for one person. Could you help carry it up after dinner?" I lifted the pot of macaroni. "Don't get much more homecooked than powdered cheese, but if you'd rather takeout, I can put in a call."

"If you do; otherwise, I'm fine." Caelan pulled out a chair and sat facing the window over the sink. "When you plan on telling the kid you mercy-killed her brother?"

"Not so loud!" I hissed, checking for signs of the girl. "And, not yet. What if she gets angry, rips out her earring and turns? I can barely handle Igor when she's pissed."

"Was fixin' to suggest the same. Glad you haven't."

Broken macaroni shapes clung to the sides of the pot. *In a flash of memory, I saw again the broken bones jutting from the corpse's neck as it*

lunged after me. I portioned my share with a gag.

Caelan noticed. "Alright there?"

"Fine," I muttered. "What's the status on Stephen's pelt?"

Mila saved Caelan from replying by virtue of strolling into the kitchen with Samson in her arms. His legs dragged along the ground, front paws stuck straight out.

Thank God he was a lazy old man. If she'd captured Igor, both cat and werecub would be howling. Demonstrating proper support, I scooped my cat into my arms. "Ask the sheriff to please fix you a plate. There's corn in the microwave, Caelan. Yeah, I know. *Delicious.* Mila picked our menu."

We set her up at the coffee table. I'd promised her dinner and a movie.

Caelan checked his pocket watch. "Isn't it late?"

"She's not gonna sleep." I shrugged. "And it isn't a school night." Not to mention I was way in over my head.

Samson kneaded a throw pillow beside Mila. Igor was too busy to join the couch crew, puffed to the gills and glaring at the adult werewolf from the safety of the fireplace grates.

"Thank you, Deputy Davins." Mila reached around to offer Samson a bite. The regal cat sniffed, accepted a piece off her fork, and promptly dropped the gooey treat on my couch.

I plucked the errant noodle. "Wanna know a secret?" I asked her. "After you're done eating, if you pet Samson right here behind his ears, he'll stay on your lap through the entire movie."

"The whole time?"

"Even if you fall asleep."

Or until Igor inevitably knocked something to the floor and piqued his curiosity.

"Never envisioned myself renting a Barbie movie," I said, returning to company more my age.

Caelan watched me wash my hands and pour two cups of juice, a pensive look in his eyes.

I leaned against the counter and paused to regard him in turn. "What?"

"Nothing." He tossed the thin folder on the table between our plates. "Your requested information."

"Fast turnaround."

“Unfortunately, my office needs time to get more information, and after his arrival in the states, your grandfather was not well documented.”

Setting down our drinks, my hand hesitated over the blank cover. Better to eat first, in case I lost my appetite.

With our plates rinsed and Mila absorbed in her movie, I pulled Caelan into the formal dining room, where we could keep an eye on her while maintaining enough privacy to talk. Our dining room was never used for anything except stacking stuff that didn't belong anywhere else: posters, old artwork, project and training supplies either myself or Lisa needed to grab on short notice.

The sheriff sat beside me, but rested his hand on the back of my chair as I read.

Warren Benjamin (German birthname unlisted) had been a former SA Brownshirt then SS officer defected from the Nazi party for reasons unknown in August of 1940, at which point he worked as a spy for the United States. He made appearances across Germany before his cover was blown and he joined a military unit, earning the moniker The Second Wolf.

The majority of the text had been redacted, including what happened to him once he'd left for Greece. I flipped it shut with a halfhearted smile. “Thanks for getting this.”

Caelan leaned away to take a quick peek at Mila. The girl was already nodding off. “Not what you were hoping for?”

“There's hardly anything here. Who was he before he changed allegiances? What was his name?”

“He changed it at least twice in the United States before we lost him. Seems your family was trying real hard to bury themselves.” The sheriff gaze followed the delicate pattern of the stenciled floral trim around the walls. “Still don't know your name, Miss Davins.”

I looked him dead in the eye. “Sucks when people disappear, doesn't it?”

“Proves the process works.” He tapped the paperwork. “Really not going to tell me?”

Considering the consequences of my next move carefully, I set my hand on his thigh and whispered in his ear, “ You'll have to work harder.”

The man gave me a look both appraising and keen. His hand covered mine. “Sure you want to play this game?”

Anticipation tightened my core. “Fun's allowed, right?”

One side of his mouth turned up. He set my hand on my knee. His fingertips brushed my forearm as he rose. “There’s unfinished business on the table, Miss Davins.”

“Cast my vote for clearing it,” I said, and with a glimpse in the living room added, “After bedtime.”

He came around behind my chair. “I reckon I don’t need to devote much effort into figuring your name, except for my personal satisfaction.” His fingertips traced the curve of my cheek as I turned my head up toward him.

“Why’s that?” I asked in genuine curiosity.

“However you and Ingram Hayes are connected, I don’t believe your exact name is important. I know his history, and I know yours since you’ve popped into existence in Connecticut. He may be here for you at behest of a higher power, but it isn’t your original name drawing him, considering your tracks have been well-covered and nothing suggests you’ve lured him here yourself.”

“So what has?”

With those three little words, the warmth of his touch disappeared. Restless, a different kind of excitement toning his amber eyes, he crossed to the opposite side of the table. “Blood. Likely something or someone in your family history has steered him your way. Werewolves can act demonic, but we ain’t demons, and we don’t become them when we die, least, not to our knowledge. The entity may have used your grandfather’s voice to taunt you, but it ain’t out of the realm of possibility your grandfather, maybe even your grandmother, shook hands with the devil.” He gestured at the file. “You’re positive you don’t have living relatives or extended family who may know of your name change and whereabouts?”

“We severed all ties.” I ripped the elastic from my hair, running my fingers through the dark waves, gathering my thoughts and his attention. “Except a woman Gram knew from the concentration camp. I was more tightlipped than Gram, I think, or she really couldn’t keep the two lives separate. A few others, Mrs. Finn and her deceased mother, know at least her name, if not more.”

Could Gram have told our history to Calico’s mom? Had Cal overhead? Or had she offered a little truth to those friends she never lied to?

Reluctantly, I surrendered Elfrie’s name and explained how she’d visited when Gram was alive and how I’d contacted her asking after Warren.

“If you’re wondering whether I knew Gramps was a werewolf, I suspected.”

“Jiggled his bones the night you bought the shovel,” he reasoned. “Dead have been scratching their coffins since the necromancer’s arrival, but if Tolbert was involved in your family’s coverup, you’d have crossed state lines.”

“Yes,” I said, a little frightened how quickly he’d drawn the conclusion.

“Lucky you did,” he continued. “Might could’ve unearthed a midnight surprise if you’d desecrated a site around the Litchfield Hills.”

Grampa’s yellow sneer gnawed at my brain. “You get many zombie calls?”

“Worsening... We’ve increased police presence around the hot spots and upped patrols in the quieter graveyards. Couple disappearances, more than a few encounters reported by ghost hunters, psychics, and drunks, but no one’s been attacked and lived to tell the tale. Last week, Jali and I headed to a cemetery in Burlington to exterminate a ghoul that’d mistaken a high school senior for its now animate prey. Footage has leaked to Youtube and other sites, but we’ve buried results where we could. Funny enough, the public believes the videos have been faked due to the footage being high resolution.”

“You’re an advocate for humans joining the Otherworld, right?”

He nodded.

“Why not shine a light under the bed?”

“I don’t try hard to keep things quiet,” he agreed, “But, Marcy, much as it pains me to say it, you should talk to someone with a more nuanced view. Try Mrs. Finn. There are good reasons why folks are content to abide by the Otherworld’s laws. It ain’t my place as the minority to decide what’s best for the majority. We’ve got to convince them.” The conversation tilted with a discerning look from the sheriff. “Warren killed your family?”

I gathered my thoughts, tired of lies, tired of being alone. “He destroyed them.”

After I’d detailed the night in a surprisingly emotionless tone, as if I’d replayed it so many times I didn’t have any tears left, Caelan paced the room. “Your grandfather kills your family, excepting you and your grandmother. She dispatches him and calls Tolbert to the scene. You avoided a bite, and so werewolf you are not.”

“Don’t sound so disappointed.”

“It’s better that you’re human.”

“Why?”

He stopped in front of me. “Knowing what you do tonight, could your grandmother have been bitten? After ‘snapping’ to borrow your eloquent phrasing, typical behavior for a stricken, married Wereperson would be to first seek and turn their spouse.”

“She had blood on her face and neck when she rescued me. I assumed it belonged to Gramps.”

“She have any scars resembling a dog bite?”

“Gram had scars on scars. She also wore scarves, turtlenecks and chunky jewelry, more so when she was older, when the wrinkles and liverspots drew attention. Of what she couldn’t hide, I never noticed a single scar she didn’t have a story about: none involving canines.”

“Raised her granddaughter under a false identity beside a formidable pack. Imagine she’d show registration the middle claw.”

“She was often gardening and taking nature hikes with Cal’s mom. She never turned after she died, but, thinking about it, I buried her in sterling silver earrings, her favorites, the pair she’d been wearing when she’d died.”

“What funeral home had you sent her to?”

“Marshburn and Sons. She had made arrangements in advance so I wouldn’t have to.”

The sheriff chewed his lip. “Henry Marshburn tops our the list of recommended Society morticians in the northeast.”

“Shit.” I paused. “If the flesh rots off a corpse and the silver becomes unattached, so to speak, will the bones—?”

“Magic decays, too.”

“She passed two years ago.”

“Be a tossup at that stage, and if she stays human, inconclusive. In the current climate, the risk isn’t worth the trauma of inviting the necromancer into what’s left of her flesh.”

“Wouldn’t be traumatic for you.”

“I’d rather not disturb her body unless necessary.”

To witness the flutter of the moldered blue scarf I’d buried her in, her withered chin rising over the coffin, eye sockets sunken and brittle lips cracked into a smile . . .

“Good,” I said, relieved, and rose, first to check on Mila, the girl was

out; then to rest my shoulder against the dining room window. I waved Caelan over. When he closed the distance, I turned into him and took the time from his pocket watch. “Say she was a werewolf. Say Tolbert’s obsession went both ways. If she had a hunk of NY strip steak waiting, why wasn’t she registered? I would think it’d be easier to, uh, enjoy, if it was publicly acceptable to do so.”

“It is.” His smile seemed sad, but I couldn’t quite fathom why. “As to your grandmother, I’d wager for your sake as a human, she convinced Tolbert not to require her registration, otherwise you would have been raised with proper knowledge and a choice.”

“Another Stephen,” I mumbled, returning the watch into his vest pocket. “But why would Tolbert and Gannon agree?”

“Tolbert was a formidable sheriff in his prime. Gannon likely turned a blind eye at his request. Tolbert, however, fell in love,” Caelan said, meeting my eyes then quickly averting his. He cleared his throat. “Based on Tolbert’s journals, your grandmother had entered into a relationship with the sheriff prior to the incident leading to your residence in this house. Given Warren was a Germanic werewolf in origin, she and the Tolbert may have met around the time of your grandparents’ arrival in New York.”

“Was Warren registered?”

“If he was, it was under a pseudonym or Tolbert had the name scrubbed. Simplest explanation I can fathom: Warren broke rank traveling to Greece and retrieving your grandmother. Somehow his hand was forced and he was required to register as a werewolf. However, he registered under a false name—”

“—possibly my mother’s actual maiden name, according to her birth certificate—” I eyed one of the blank sketchbooks on the far end of the table, tempted to whip it open and start assembling a family tree with a running list of everyone’s name. I didn’t know what or who we were trying to hide, but Caelan was right; we had done a damn good confusing job of it.

“—and the lie was discovered by a diligent NYPA clerk, which may have initiated an encounter between Tolbert and your grandmother, and introduced subsequent tension between your grandparents. What bothers me is Gannon agreeing to let her slip long after Tolbert retired. He was a proponent of the old days. He wouldn’t have let the opportunity go to hunt you and your grandmother down. When I travelled north to relieve Gannon, he was planning the murder of a young single mother after having already

murdered her son. Kid did nothing but get into the wrong car. Mother did nothing but save her neighborhood from a Dullahan, one of the spirits raised by Mr. Hayes.”

“What happened to her?”

“Lost her file in the transition from Gannon to myself.”

“She’s okay?”

“Not after losing a child, but last I heard she’s rebuilding her life.”

I couldn’t help but think of Mila. “It’s evil, using a child this way.”

“It’ll get worse,” he warned. “We’ll have to sacrifice resources to protect her.”

“I’m okay with that,” I said through a fleeting smile. “It’ll be you and me in the end, anyway, whatever that looks like.”

“Yeah, I reckon so.”

“I’m glad for that. I’m glad I’m not alone, and I’m glad you helped that poor mother escape. Tolbert may have been the human-shaped garbage you suggest, but I’m glad he found it in his trash heap of a heart to help my grandmother. Maybe sheriffs aren’t all bad.”

“Maybe there’s something about y’all that bad folks are drawn to.”

I wasn’t sure why, but his comment stung. “Lumping yourself into a group of winners, aren’t you?”

He looked away again. “I’m not any better.”

“Well, what a relief. You aren’t different; I’m a supernatural venus fly trap.”

Concern flashed through his eyes. “Marcy—”

“I know,” I snapped. “I’m sorry. All the sense has drained from my world and I’m left to wander a landscape of melted clocks and stairs leading nowhere. I’m frustrated.”

He squeezed my shoulder. “Me, too.”

My dim smile, reflected in the glass of Gram’s beloved curio, betrayed a level exhaustion I’d never seen on my face before. “Is it common for a werewolf to snap after learning they’ve been cheated on?”

“Can’t speak to an individual without a better sense of their mental state. There are, however, more common crimes of passion amongst Werefolk. As I’ve told you, instinct is tough to control.” He touched the serpentine ink. “Most successful new Werefolk and other supernatural creatures come about as a result of marriages where the family member joins the Otherworld. Relationships between humans and Werefolk often contain

too many secrets and risks to work. Keeping the secret and marrying a human..." He raised his eyebrows. "There's a safety element involved. Turning humans preserves our species and genetic diversity. For those we love, the instinct is to make you one of us. Left curtailed, combined with other stressors such as physical and mental health, and one day your lover may accidentally or over-zealously convert you. I've seen marriages of thirty, forty years end in bloodshed because, after years of denial, instinct won. I've seen young folks turned out of spite because they're moving on in a relationship; so with every shift they'll be an echo of their ex."

"Let me try and figure this," I said. "Warren and Genessa never had a child of their own, which leads me to believe she may have been human for a while. She was already pregnant with my mother when they met. Hence, no fangs for me unless I've been chipped with silver this entire time. Gramps, denied his pack, sensing another male encroaching on his turf, may have snapped and attempted to change us before Tolbert could?"

"Possible." Caelan frowned. "If Warren had known anything about sheriffs, and I'm certain he had, he'd have known we only bite to kill."

"You don't think Warren might've been a sheriff in Germany, do you?"

"Hands or paws?"

"Hands."

"Then no."

I slumped back in a chair, propped my elbows on the table and rubbed my temple. "Well, if I can't piece together what Ingram and his overlord want with me, I guess I'll buy eight ounces of pork blood from my butcher and attempt to commune with them direct through a cereal bowl."

"Let's sleep on that idea." Caelan pulled me to my feet. "Sure you're okay with me staying?"

I held up my hand. "One, you're dog tired. Two, I offended the cats by pulling the warm sheets from the dryer and locking them out of my bedroom, so my night better be worth making their shit-list. Three, bad parenting 101: I forgot to call Calico. If trouble comes knocking, I'd prefer having my big bad wolf around."

He chuckled. "*Your* big bad wolf?"

I lifted one shoulder, embarrassed. "Well, if you want to be. Either way, I'd like you to stay."

"Alright."

“To the staying or being mine?”

He rubbed his chin. “That’d be the second mystery I’m fixin’ to solve tonight.”

I dimmed the lights. “You mean the only mystery you’re able to. Hate to break it to you, but I haven’t spoken my true name in years.”

“I may find myself unable to draw a bat in a cave, but rest assured, Miss Davins, I will draw your name off your lips.” He approached, stopped with a few feet to spare, looking every bit a wolf hungry enough to swallow the moon. . . “Well, if you want me to.” . . . And there behind his golden eyes the last of his restraint burned low.

I pressed a finger against his chest. “Ah, ah, ah,” I tutted, letting my nail tease his throat and chin in turning toward the hall. “Business first. If you’d be so kind as to follow me into the basement, we’ve a sewing machine to haul.”

The white-tipped flag of Samson’s tail caught my eye. Under the blue-grey flicker of the television, both girl and cat slept sound. I paused against the door frame to observe them.

“She’s a good kid, Caelan. Doesn’t deserve what happened to her.”

“Neither do you.”

Caelan came behind me with a light brush of his hand to my hip. I glanced at him, inquiring, and his eyes warmed with affection. My heart swelled. I understood what we could be the way an artist realizes the picture in a fresh canvas. There had been a few light sketches, but the pencil had been put away in favor of paint’s permanence, and his touch marked the first stroke.

I crossed my arms and let my hand explore the back of his. Caelan took a deep breath, hesitated, then slid his hand over my stomach and drew me close.

Against my ear he whispered, “If you plan on pressing me for that favor, Miss Davins, I have a few suggestions.”

Giggling, I knocked my shoulder back against his chest, felt amusement tighten his grip, then we separated and the worry on his face smothered my mood in oiled quicksand.

“Run while you still can,” he said. “Please, Marcy.”

He stepped around into the light even as I shrank back across the dining room threshold to keep the conversation from reaching Mila.

“What about the necromancer?”

“We’ll deal with Mr. Hayes and whatever devil’s tugging his strings. Problem’s my brother. He’s got a capacity to love similar to a roundworm: no heart, but a couple soft spots. He believes you’re steering me into an early retirement and will do what he considers best for me.”

“Nice of him.”

“Death by lesser evil is still death.” Caelan strode into the darkened room after me. Storm clouds rolled through his voice, a warning rumble that set me on edge like a deer in a midnight fog. He rolled back the sleeve hiding a tattooed serpent. “If this department trial doesn’t work out, and if the Society has their way it most certainly will not, August informed me he’ll be the one following through on your invitation. The list of suggestions for what he’d do with you is abominable. It’s one thing to hear it; it’s another beast entirely to experience. If you felt even a fraction of the pain, you’d run. I know you’d run.”

I swallowed hard. “Do it.”

His gaze held a sharp intensity. “What?”

“Show me. Make me run.” My voice rang with a fool’s gold confidence. “This may be your final chance to frighten me. Lay your mouth on mine and I may not ever be.”

He caught my arm, grabbed with such heat to his touch I expected his fingernails to flake off in favor of claws. “If you experienced firsthand what my kind have done, what these hands are meant to do. . . .”

I took his hands in mine and laid them on my neck. His fingers flexed around my throat: an intentional grip, careful but firm enough to feel the roughening paw pads beneath his skin. As my heart beat to a dizzying anticipation, his touch waned.

His breaths came shorter, labored. Sweat on his brow marked the struggle against a howling undercurrent. “I can’t.”

I caught him by one heated wrist. “Where will you be, Caelan? Do you nip our heels to save us, and if that doesn’t work, too bad, so sad, on to the next sheep?”

He held a small, considerate pause. “You aren’t a sheep.”

I laid my hand on his chest, over his pounding, human heart. He glanced from hand to face, and the lingering polite distance between us closed. “You’re no savage wolf,” I said, drawing him into a hug. “You’re a man, and you’re trying. I don’t agree with everything you’ve done or might come to do, but I appreciate your effort. I appreciate you.”

He hesitated, but as my face pressed against the soft texture of his vest, his hands came to rest on my back. When I leaned away, he held me still.

“Caelan, I—”

Cupping my cheek, he searched my eyes. “Tell me why you're so important.”

chapter 20

THE WOLVES COMING

He had not transformed and yet the air steamed between us. Looking into those wild, hungry eyes, I didn't want to talk.

“Marcy?” His thumb rubbed my cheek as if to coax a reply.

For first time since I'd left my grandparents' cabin, I felt truly seen. I weighed both stakes and consequences to draw a single conclusion: “Does it matter, Caelan?” Nervous, excited energy coursed through my veins. With a vulpine grin I hooked my fingers in his belt. “Will it change how you feel?”

“No,” he said in a murmured rush, lifting me onto the table. Documents fluttered left and right. He grabbed my waist and pulled me to the edge against him. A small noise caught his attention, but my hands were in his hair, drawing his face to mine. Our eyes met once more in the dark. We were watches wound and ready, on the cusp of falling in sync.

But in the second remaining before his mouth pressed mine, Caelan cursed and stumbled. Igor hung onto his ankle by tooth and claw, a raggedy mop of malice and hisses, until the sheriff slipped on scattered papers and hit the floor. The black cat hustled underneath the table.

Samson's head popped over the arm of the couch. He jumped the side and bounded to my feet as I sank beside the man, relieved Igor hadn't been squished and annoyed I hadn't been kissed.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” he said through a small laugh, resting his arms on his knees. “Just bruised my tailbone.”

“I'm so sorry.” Even as Samson squeezed himself between Caelan and I in search of hands offering pets, Igor bumped the wall and followed the baseboard to the doorway with a sassy flick of her tail, slinking toward the rolling credits. “She's a brat when she wants to be.”

Caelan ran his hands through his hair. “Little Lady’s got her priorities straight, unlike yours truly. I should be apologizing, Miss Davins.” Sneezing, he scratched the older cat’s chin. “Went too far.”

My neglected libido, which had never before experienced the thrill of being hoisted onto a table, didn't think he'd gone far enough. I leaned into the man. “Let’s agree to disagree.”

That earned a chuckle and a short-lived grin. “You caught me at a weak moment. I'm exhausted. ‘Bed’ is sounding real good however I get there.” He rose and offered his hand. “Now, if you'll pardon my antics, I'll fetch your sewing machine then take a hobble around the property. Lock the doors. Let me in when I knock.”

“Or what? You'll huff and you'll puff?”

After retrieving Gram’s antique Singer, he exited through the front and left me to settle Mila upstairs. Samson had smushed himself between the girl’s back and the cushion. Igor stared balefully at the pair from the loveseat. Shooing the cat before she could terrorize the werepup, I woke Mila and got her and Samson situated for bed.

The backyard motion detector flipped on as I started on Snowmane’s pattern.

“Wires crossed, my ass,” I muttered.

Fifteen minutes after I'd cut the cloth, the blood-speckled wolf pawed at my slider. Ears swiveled and eyes bright with human intellect, he waited one entire second, then scratched again. When our eyes met, his snout pressed forward and fogged the glass.

“Seriously?” I groaned, unlocking the slider.

The wolf shoved his head through at first opportunity and shouldered in. He paused to regard the empty couch, then navigated carefully into the kitchen and sprawled against the air-conditioning vent.

“I made the bed for you and everything, but whatever.”

One ear rotated toward the sound of my voice.

Igor, intrigued and pissy about the wolf in her kingdom, crept beside him with her bottlebrush tail raised for war.

When her prey exhaled a drowsy sigh, she slapped him across the snout. He lifted his head and the corner of his lip, but with a grumpy growl angled his face the opposite direction.

Igor had spent the afternoon meowing to be let into my bedroom; later, after being shut in to allow the sheriff rest, she became desperate to

escape. As punishment, I was forced to listen to her scratching at the door through the night, earning a reprieve only when I retrieved Mila around three in the morning. Holding Mila's hand, helpless as she cried, hurt worse than any physical pain the Otherworld could have inflicted.

By the time I'd stumbled out of the shower, it was nine am. Highs were forecasted into the mid-eighties, so my choice of jeans and a black baggy sweater was a sauna in the making, but after encountering the walking dead, lighter colors were too much of a stain risk. I dug one of Gram's concealed carry holsters out of the closet. Caelan and I worked as a team, so I needed to be able to protect myself (and him) when he was and wasn't close. After a thorough assessment from all angles in the mirror, I deemed the coverup satisfactory and jogged downstairs for an expert opinion.

Caelan had made coffee and scrambled eggs. Mina sat on the couch brushing Samson. The wereling had her earring out on the counter. Tempted though I was to show off my handiwork, I had tucked Snowmane underneath the bed for a nighttime discovery.

The sheriff set a cup of coffee in front of me. "Morning, sunshine."

"Well aren't you bright-eyed and bushy-tailed?" I observed, settling into an empty kitchen chair.

He sat across from me, tapping the table. "People to see, places to go."

From the state of my kitchen—clean, sink emptied and counters wiped—he'd been raring to go for a while.

"The father of a hospital patient spoke with Jali yesterday. His son was in for a broken wrist. Met our suspect in the common area restroom. We've got footage of them talking, however, this father ID'd him as Mr. Harry Shan, owner of The Sooty Cat Witchcraft Company." Caelan slid his cell across the table. The browser was open to a spells and witchcraft website. Front and foremost was a squat, elderly Chinese gentleman gripping a cat and a fistful of colorful incense sticks.

"Leona described Ingram. The footage shows a man of Ingram's build. I know the cameras didn't get his face, but how is it possible this father

saw someone so different?”

“Shouldn’t be, yet this man insists Shan”—using two fingers, he magnified the seller’s smiling face—“visited him and his son five minutes before the attack, peddling a charm that would see his son back slinging pitches in time for the high school baseball championship.”

“I’m not liking this face changing thing,” I admitted. “And before you ask, no, I didn’t dream about you or anyone else.” It’d been quiet. Maybe too quiet.

“Harry calls the suburbs of Hartford home. Few weeks ago, he was hauled in over an incident concerning the werewoman with tentacle hair Jorge described. He’d rented his basement to one of Ingram Hayes’ associates. Let him off with a warning.”

“Is he human?”

“Werewolf; handed.”

“Why’d you give him a pass?”

“The ecosystem needs a few rats. He ain’t harmless; but he’s informative.” Caelan watched me pull out my phone. “Who’re you texting?”

“Cal. I’m going to see if she’d let Mila have a play date with Aiden, or if she knows a good babysitter.”

“You shouldn’t trust Mrs. Finn.” He leaned on the table. The concern in his voice was more for me than Mila. “She has an agenda.”

“And you don’t?”

“You already know mine.”

“Not after last night I don’t.”

“That was a lapse in judgment. It could have gone another way.”

“Yeah, you could’ve woken up on nice, clean sheets instead of dirty laminate.”

His eyebrows rose. He reached across the table to take my hand. “If I’d carried you upstairs last night, Miss Davins, the sheets would hardy be clean.”

Blushing, I took a sip of coffee. “Glad to see a good night’s sleep has refreshed your wit, sheriff. You’ll need it. Cal’s on her way.”

The pack's alpha stood on my doorstep not ten minutes later, dressed in a paint-splattered white tee and jean jumper. "Painting Stephen's bedroom," she explained, picking dried latex off her nails. "I walk by his room every morning, getting ready to holler he'll be late for work. Man or beast, we are creatures of habit. Nothing says, 'wake the fuck up, Calico, your brother's dead' like a gloss of cherry wine paint."

I stepped onto the porch and into the humid morning. "What about Evie?"

"Hasn't slept in their bedroom since he went missing. Weird, if you ask me."

I waved a fly away from my head. "After she passed, I boxed my grandma's belongings and moved the furniture around, but stayed in my old bedroom for months. Igor, my cat I'd adopted around the same time, got a bladder infection and peed on Gram's bedspread. It was only when I pulled it off that I had a good cry and felt comfortable moving in."

"Loss makes everyone do funny things, I guess," she said, peering over my shoulder toward a commotion in the kitchen.

Caelan had lifted Mila onto his shoulders so she could lure Samson down off the fridge. When the cat yawned and rolled onto his back instead, the pair of werewolves relented and headed for the porch.

"Speaking of doing . . ." Cal waved a dappled hand at the approaching sheriff. "He's a piece of something, sugar, and it ain't pie. Get what you need and get away."

Whatever her opinions, the sheriff was nothing short of pleasant as he ducked under the doorway. "Radiant as always, Miss Finn."

"Sheriff." The darkness in her eyes receded as her attention fell upon the wide-eyed girl pulling his hair like reins.

Calico Finn possessed charisma, charm, motherliness, and a welcoming smile: the combination of which drew many people to her. Within five minutes Mila was calling her Auntie. On Auntie Cal's instructions, the girl wandered off to 'find lightning bugs sleeping in the hydrangeas,' occasionally glancing over her shoulder to smile at the alpha.

I passed Cal a plastic baggie. "Her earring. She complained all yesterday. I don't know if she's got a rash, allergy, or if she irritated the skin tugging it."

"She's testing you." We watched the girl check the undersides of leaves. "The Otherworld's dumping the poor child into their sewer system?"

“They want me to take her for the foreseeable future, but Mila needs someone who can understand what she is and how to handle it. This situation isn’t fair to her,” I said with a glance at Caelan. “I was hoping you'd know a responsible family who could babysit or put in an application when the time comes.”

“Aiden would appreciate a playmate,” she agreed. “Evie always wanted a kid, but it was never the right time for Stephen. Now isn’t appropriate, but Evie and Mila may find solace together.”

“We are in your debt, Mrs. Finn,” the sheriff announced, dropping his hand on my shoulder.

Cal's smile thinned at the sight.

“Marcy, if you’re almost ready, shall we? Our officers will be returning to watch your home any minute.”

“Let me check the cats and grab a couple cold waters from the fridge.”

When I moved inside, Cal laid a hand on the sheriff's chest and whispered into his ear. The sheriff gave a curt, “Mrs. Finn” and headed to the truck.

She stood arms-crossed on my porch while I locked the door. “Any word on Stephen’s pelt?”

I glanced from alpha to lone wolf. “No.”

“My offer stands: retrieve my brother’s pelt and I will whisk you away from this hell. An art thief has use for an art curator.”

“I'm not a curator.”

She curled a strand of hair around her finger. “Would you like to be?”

The truck rumbled to life. “I appreciate your watching Mila.” I tucked my keys into my purse. “I'll call when I'm ready to pick her up.”

“Stay safe.” She kissed my cheek before trotting down to call on Mila's progress. No bugs, but she did find an earthworm the robins hadn't gotten.

“What'd you do to piss her off?” I asked Caelan as I slid into the seat beside him, slipping my phone into a sweater pocket. The vehicle had preserved the night's cooler, drier air.

“Besides breathing? You wouldn't believe me.”

I angled my head. “I accepted werewolves pretty damn gracefully.”

“About that,” he said. “The wolves coming won't be graceful about accepting you. Be ready to bite back.”

Harry Shan's shop, Spellbound, lay tucked away among dilapidated homes and three family apartments outside Hartford. The sheriff was oblivious to the chain link fences, barking dogs and broken needles as we passed beneath laundry hung to dry across adjacent buildings. Into a narrow alley between homes we passed, straight into an ugly, weed-strewn backyard.

The man from the website stood in his silk pajamas filling a birdbath. At a flash of Caelan's badge, he dropped the hose and scurried around to shut the water off. Licking his lips, eyes darting left and right, he smoothed his white mustache with a wrinkled, nervous hand. "Whatever they sent, it was old."

"Harry, Harry, Harry," the sheriff sighed, rounding on the man a few steps ahead of me. "What am I going to do with you, Harry? You swore on your dear mum's grave you'd quit."

The man paled, tripped on his birdbath as he backed up to his house. "I did! I haven't rented any more space to someone with luggage that leaks!"

Caelan caught him calmly by the elbow and proceeded to walk him toward the truck. "Not only was my analyst traumatized when that thing latched onto his face, the ink stained so bad we had to shift to remove it. Needless to say, my clothes were ruined."

"I'm sorry." Holding up his hands, Harry tried to step out in front of the sheriff. "I'll cover any expense."

"I really liked that vest, Harry." Eyes square on his target, Caelan stopped and called back to me, "Marcy, my brother's in town today, is it?"

"Yep," I said, straight-faced. "And he didn't eat on the plane."

"Let's keep this quick and easy, Harry," Caelan said, releasing the smaller man to consult his watch. With a satisfactory nod, he slipped it into his vest pocket. "Or you might could be joining us for lunch. Bayberry General lists you as a regular annoyance on their grounds. Can you provide me with the date of your last visit?"

"Oh." Mr. Shan tightened the knot in his pajama pants. "I have nothing to do with that wolf."

"The date of your last visit, Mr. Shan."

"Late December. People want Christmas miracles."

"Ah," Caelan said, scribbling in his notebook. "So my witness

claiming to have seen your handsome moustache at the hospital minutes prior to the attack must be mistaken.”

“I haven’t addressed anyone from L’enfer Requins since you came.” Mr. Shan waved his free hand at the empty yard. “And I haven’t left my home in days.”

“Got any witnesses who can confirm your whereabouts?”

The man chewed his lip, glancing from one nearby home to the next. “I heal wounds, sheriff. I do not create them. I can give names, but they will not talk and they will see to it I never talk, either. In fact, an innocent man rests now in my shop, recovering from the bullets I took out of his leg three days ago.”

Behind his back, Caelan indicated the far side of the house. “Listen, Harry, might I call you Harry? Thank you.” He draped his arm around the old man's back, steering him past the birdbath. “We don't want to trouble you more than necessary. I don't want a neighborhood to lose a respected and honorable healing man...” His tone, smooth as a river, faded as I approached the back door.

Screen, glass, barred and locked. From what I could see through the layers, boxes and the occasional dirty plate filled the ‘shop.’

I crept to the next window and drew a cautious glimpse of the interior. A man lay reclined on a sofa, facing a television opposite me. From the angle, I couldn't determine whether he'd suffered an injury, but a gun lay on the end table beside him.

The visual didn't scare me the way it would have a couple months ago, hell, a couple days ago. Slipping back out of sight, I imagined this stranger’s head exploding the way James' had and felt sick. I didn't want to spill more blood, be it mine, Caelan's or anyone else's. I hated the feeling of killing someone, and the thought of having to use a gun again sickened me, even though I knew it was a real possibility.

I returned to Caelan and Mr. Shan, but couldn't focus on anything the men were discussing, instead replaying James’ death over and again.

On the matter of changing faces, Harry Shan offered two names. These were practitioners of what he called true dark magic, people who, his quavering voice claimed, had knowledge of the old ways that lifted the veil beyond this world and the next. If anyone had the skill to work with or for Ingram, it was them.

The first was a woman in Bridgeport who called herself Skeleta,

which Caelan ordered an actual deputy investigate. The second was a man who ran an unnamed shop on the fringe Nokhurst Crossing, a large shopping district in West Hartford.

Nothing in Connecticut was far, but the shop was forty minutes from my house vs almost two hours for Skeleta's Den of Dark Delights.

A real shaman, he was rumored to be. Witch Doctor. Fertility expert. Purveyor of exotic needs. The shop lived up to its name - or lack thereof: a black, solid door with an old scratching of a jaguar's or leopard's head with its tongue sticking out. For the hustle and bustle of a wealthy shopping district, this was not the kind of store I'd ever noticed on my trips. Invisibility was a good thing, I thought, as the shop bell chimed and we entered a twilight-tented wonderland. It was a marvelous night circus within, masked in purple and black striped fabric along the walls, with dark, star-speckled drapery overhead. Wire bulbs and flickering candles softened the shadowed atmosphere.

Even if I'd never seen the dead rise, stepping into this hushed world made me feel as though black roses were in bloom beside empty graves as bones waltzed beneath the moonlight. Incense, gathered herbs, and shriveled animal limbs gave the room a rotten cake batter smell.

"Hello?" I called into the quiet. A stuffed raven's wings extended over a display of handcrafted ritual tools. I traced the lip of one hammered copper bowl.

"My ears have been aflame all morning," a voice croaked so close my first instinct was to reexamine the bird. Beyond the corvid's black feathers, his back against the striped fabric of the wall, stood a tall, thin man shuffling a deck of tarot cards. He wore a black embroidered tailcoat paired with a fine dress shirt and pants. He was a remarkably handsome man, blonde and bearded, eyes green and intelligent, set on a face with tanned skin and high cheekbones. He gestured one gloved hand toward a small table to his left set for three.

"And now my heart's on fire, too. Won't you join me, Miss Davins?"

Caelan touched the small of my back. "Careful now," he whispered.

"Why ever so, sheriff?" the shaman asked, touching a hand to his chest and pouting. "Do you feel I've been naughty, perhaps a bit misbehaved?" He winked one green eye. I felt it like a promise deep within. "It's far too early in the day for my kind of mischief."

"I'll join you," I volunteered, studying the man. If Mr. Shan was right

and this supposed shaman could swap any number of faces, or was being used as the host of whatever came to me in my dreams, today's guise mattered little.

Caelan appeared frustrated by a similar thought as he glanced from me, to the chairs, to the man's white, flat smile.

"Such a delight to hear, darling!" the man said, hurrying to pull out a chair. "And you, sheriff?"

Caelan motioned to a rack of t-shirts and general kitschy items meant for dabblers and folks who wanted something fun to buy around Halloween. "Still browsing."

"Fine collection of silver along the back wall." Sitting only after I did, the shaman laced his fingers together and set his chin on his hands. "Seems it's the pair of us kittens, Marcy. What brings you to my humble abode?"

"What's your name?" I asked.

He twirled the end of his beard. "No, 'how did you know mine?"

I offered him a one-sided shrug. "You have your ways."

"Curiosity often kills cats, doesn't it?" His smile was absent true fangs, but pointed nonetheless. "You may call me Zakar."

"That's not your name," I said, monitoring Caelan's patrol of the shop.

"It's what you may call me, my dear deputy." He spoke in a slow, eloquent tone, as if each word were honey-dipped, in an accent familiar and foreign to me. "My other names are dead. We'd be inviting the spirits in if they got a hold of one of those."

The hair on the back of my neck rose. The early dreams of the green-eyed man had faded into hazy snippets of sensual memory, but at his prompt returned in vivid detail. I remembered this face, these emerald eyes, his lean body grinding mine into the table. He held my hands captive over my head, using his mouth to work my neck raw.

"So red," Zakar said, snapping me back to reality with a brush of his gloved hand on my forearm. "Are you alright, my dear? Do you need to lie down?"

I pulled my hands into my lap. "Do you know why we're here?"

"Wearing those dreadfully plain clothes? I'd suggest the usual reason couples slip through my front door; however, you've trotted in on a reaper's arm, a most disobedient one at that. Rather disappointing, if you ask me." His expression darkened as his attention flicked briefly onto my companion. "I'm afraid your visit is the result of an investigation into the terrible tragedy that

has befallen the werewolf community.” He lifted a finger to pause my interruption. “Several Metacomet relations have asked after my services in locating their loved ones.”

“And have you?”

The sadness in his voice failed to reach his eyes. “Alas, revealing their location is beyond this mere magician's capabilities.”

“What do you know about raising the dead?”

“I know people believe the dead can be raised.”

“And what do you believe?”

“I believe in possibilities, my dear. An almost infinite amount of them exist between the realm of angels and the lair of the one who lurks beneath the deepest sea.”

The shop bell chimed.

Zakar rose. I jumped to my feet as he did. “Ah, this I did not anticipate. Meeting you has been a pleasure, Marcy. I look forward to our next dalliance.” His smile made my skin prickle with anticipation.

A petite woman with brown hair pulled back from her face stepped through the door. She had hard eyes and shared the same no-nonsense expression as her partner, a man a bit taller than Caelan, with the same black hair and striking amber eyes. He caught sight of the sheriff, who hadn't moved since the door opened.

“Harlowe!” the man shouted, opening his arms. “Looking good, bro!”

Caelan nodded. “Better than you, August.”

Fingertips teased the hair from my neck. Zakar's voice, a honey-sweet purr, tickled my ear. “Best to seek shelter in a lightning storm.”

I whipped around, but the man had vanished.

chapter 21

SHEEP

Zakar had the right of the situation; if I could've melted into a wall, I would've. Neither of the two men had any interest in helping me feel along the fabric-covered walls for a hidden door. They didn't even appear to have noticed the shaman's departure, preoccupied with staring each other down over a candlelit altar covered in amulets and premixed spell kits.

Caelan's brother broke the standstill. "Heard you're closing on my prey," he said with a pull and a twang from the deep south. "That ain't fair."

"I've always had the better nose."

"And duller teeth."

"That's what happens when you use them."

"The prey has left the building," I announced loudly, popping open the hidden door. A dark hallway loomed large beside me.

All three looked over. Confusion touched his brother's eyes, then he whooped and grinned. "Well, looky here, Winnie! My brother's done caught a sheep in wolf's clothing."

He came forward. Wary, I moved myself between the table and him, careful to keep an eye on the stern-faced woman at the door as well. Her arms were crossed, her hand on a gun at her hip.

"Calling her a sheep won't make her grow wool." Caelan intercepted his brother with a polite smile and a hand on his shoulder. "Heard you had a chance to nab Hayes in Port Sulfur. What happened?"

"Dead end."

Forcing myself to act a wolf, I wedged my shoulder between the two brothers, set my hand on my partner, then steered him toward the exit. "Zakar won't be reemerging any time soon, but that doesn't mean he's wearing earplugs."

We'd crossed into the parking lot when Caelan's brother, a couple years older and a few inches taller, caught up to us and took my hand.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked, pulling my hand back.

With an easy tug he pulled me against him, lifting my hand to his mouth and offering the roguish smile a girl would want to see somewhere dark and romantic. “Sorry, hun. Can't expect a brute to remember his manners. Sheriff Augustin La Motte, Louisiana. This here is Winona, an actual deputy.”

Winona stared through me, passing off a monotone, “Hey.”

“One of the investigators at Stag Hill texted me a pic while Harlowe was barking.” Her sheriff pulled a strand of my hair through his fingers. “Red’s your color.”

“Careful now,” Caelan called. “She bites.”

As I stood frozen, unsure what to do, Winona wrenched away August’s hand (and a bit of my hair). “Paws off. We don’t play with someone else's food.”

“upposin’ you’re right, Winnie.” August flashed his teeth at me. “The meat is much less tender when you scare it.”

“I’m not scared,” I replied, taking small comfort in the weight of grandma's gun pressed to my lower back.

August and Winona wore the smiles of wolves who’d encountered a newborn fawn. His deputy prodded my leg with her boot.

“These calves,” she scoffed. “You'll be scared when these legs fail you.”

“Marcy’s a bright young woman.” Caelan displayed no keenness to intrude; nor should he have; I couldn't earn respect relying on him, but I was grateful for his support. “She knows her limits and plans accordingly, which works in our favor, considering the suspect wants—”

“—this little lamb all for himself, yeah, yeah. I read your report.” August slapped the side of his truck. “Got thirty feet of cordage in the bed. Bet if we string her up, he'll crawl out from whatever rock he’s hiding under before her feet stop kicking.”

“We can’t know that.” I forced a cheery smile. “But we do know he likes dead werewolves. August, why don't you volunteer to lead us to him?”

The Louisiana sheriff froze.

Winona squealed and clapped.

August tipped my chin. His eyes were so similar to Caelan’s, but lit

by a different fire. “You ever been fishing, Marcy?”

“Miss Davins.”

“See, there's a certain *visceral* response fish have when they're presented with live bait, Miss Davins.” He slid two fingers against my pulse, then took my hand and pressed it to his own. “Holds true the higher you climb the food chain.”

Caelan came between us. “This is inappropriate, August. Marcy is a member of my department. Lay a hand on her again and I will be justified in ripping it off.”

“You swiped Jali from underneath my nose. You owe me a warm body.” He gave me a once-over. “Hers'll do.”

“Touch either of them, you lose your hand. Are we understood?” At his brother's reluctant agreement, Caelan turned to me. “If you aren't careful about which hives you kick, you're gonna get stung mighty bad.” His tone was stern, but there was a faint gleam of approval in his eyes.

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“We've got a full schedule today.” Caelan leaned against his truck. “What are you doing here except startling my prey?”

The Louisiana sheriff scrolled through his phone. “Wellness check. You skipped an assignment last night.”

Skipped? I glanced across at Caelan.

Unphased, he shrugged. “And?”

“They're retracting your leash thanks to this human stunt. In these trying times, it's good to have a brother's vote of confidence.” August came beside him. “Moreso when he's overseeing your evaluation. We'll start by making this right.”

It took Caelan a while to reply. “That a request or an order?”

“Let's not nitpick.” August draped an arm over his brother's shoulder. “We haven't hunted in years. This'll be fun. You remember what fun is, don't you?”

Caelan asked a hoarse, “Who?”

“A, uh—” August glanced at his phone. “—Rachel Walker.”

In the truck's reflection, the color drained from my face. “The doctor?” I asked.

“She's been posting about the incident on social media.”

“No,” I sputtered. “You can't.”

August lifted an eye brow, the corners of his mouth forming an

incredulous smile. “No?”

“Don’t make him cross, Marcy.” Rubbing his tattoo, Caelan focused on the gravel between his boots. “You ain’t winning this.”

I frowned at him. “She barely saw anything. Write her off as nuts.”

“She saw enough not to forget,” Winnie added.

“So did I.”

August prodded my chest. “But you, lamb shank, have value.”

I slapped him.

His hand rose to return the favor when Caelan thumped the side of the truck. Glaring at him, then me, August turned on his heel and headed for his own vehicle, waving his hand. “Bring the bitch to heel.”

Caelan pointed his pen at Winnie. “Winona, please deliver Miss Davins to my department headquarters. This—” He passed me a phone number torn from his notepad. “—Is Jorge's number. Give him a heads-up to let him know you're coming. Call me when you've arrived.” His eyebrows rose in the deputy's direction. “In one piece.”

She crossed her arms. “I don't answer to you.”

“Yes, you do.” Agitation crept into Caelan’s voice. I didn't care we were in a public parking lot in a busy area of West Hartford. I wanted him to punch someone. But all he did was stare at the short deputy.

She licked her lip. “Go on, then, put me in my place.”

“Play nice, Winny,” August drawled, pulling her against his chest. “We’ll play rough later.”

She reached into his pocket for the keys and they kissed.

Disgusted, I set my sights on Caelan. “You can't,” I demanded in a panic, snatching his arm at a curl of serpentine ink.

He removed my hand with a gentle squeeze. “We'll meet you at the station in a couple hours.”

As Winona climbed into the driver’s seat of their truck, August rounded the far side of Caelan’s. With the pair’s eyes elsewhere, my sheriff patted the gun holstered to his hip. I glanced across to the moody deputy as she tightened her ponytail. She had the same firearm.

Caelan's truck peeled out of the lot, lights flashing. I couldn't be certain, but I had a strong sense he wanted me to stop them. Caelan wasn't the grim reaper personified. He wanted me to intervene. He wouldn't have let me in on her name and given me the number of someone in the department who could get me their coordinates otherwise. He wouldn't have drawn attention to Winona's gun.

Or was I projecting my feelings onto him?

Jorge's number folded safely in my pocket, I shifted around in the passenger seat to get the hand furthest from Winona better positioned to reach for Gram's gun. We took a side road into upscale residential apartments and homes, heading past one of the state's best golf courses.

"Does he have it all planned yet?" Winona asked with surprising cheer, glancing at me as she took a right onto a stretch of forested road.

"Excuse me?"

Rows and rows of elm and oak whizzed by. "I'm sure he knows how he wants to cook his lamb."

I held my tongue.

"Sometimes I ask August how he'd reap me. Sometimes we take a long weekend in the forest and I have him hunt me down and take me to the edge. You ever gotten so close to death you leave your body?"

"No." *Focus on the scenery*, I thought. Focus on getting back to Caelan before he's forced to kill Rachel.

"You will. I've known those guys since Harlowe's first and only Moonrise Hunt; they're forged of the same steel alright. You wanna test your faith, ask the Harlowe for a glimpse of the grey beyond." She paused. "Hard to do with a human, actually. Oh, well."

I rubbed my temple.

A solitary car sped past in the opposite direction.

Winnie glanced sideways at me. "Say, you wanna know how he does it, your sheriff?" Both her hands stayed on the wheel, loose, casual, nowhere near her belt.

"Never asked."

"He's a snoozefest. Got a kindergartner's grasp of the basics. Takes you by the throat and it's lights out in seconds. 'Course, he doesn't take RSVPs. Too busy splashing around up to his eyeballs in monster guts, just how he likes it. August'll reap you. You're lucky."

I rolled my eyes. "So lucky."

Feigning disinterest, I turned my attention onto the road. Were CPA standard issue sidearms equipped with silvered bullets? I couldn't remember what if anything Caelan had ever mentioned and didn't dare gamble, not when I knew what was chambered in mine.

Winnie reached across the cup holders to swat my shoulder. "You're an artist, right? August says a sheep in your particular field appreciates a master's touch. Your hide's a blank canvas, untouched, free to be detailed as he sees fit. He got inspired by that pic Sergeant McMahon sent. Not gonna lie, I'm jealous. You looked hot. A lot hotter than today."

"Gee, thanks," I said.

"He's gonna put you in a similar dress. If I'm lucky, I'll get to do the drop off. I'll give you some tips, but I can tell you right now, if you're out in the wild looking like that, he's gonna go fucking *feral*."

"How do you know what they do when they hunt?" Turning toward her to block the view some, I felt for my revolver.

"Someone's gotta pick up the pieces. One day soon, I'll be picking up what's left of you."

I made sure I was buckled, then pressed the gun to her head.

"This is full of silver," I announced in a calm tone. Because of James, I felt eerily comfortable knowing when I made the threat, I was prepared to follow-through. I hoped I wouldn't have to, but in my heart I'd already decided I could if it meant getting to Rachel in time. "Pull onto the shoulder right now and you will live to pick up my pieces at a later date."

The truck slowed and rumbled twenty feet off the road, crushing brush and wild daffodils. Winona lifted her hands off the wheel as we rolled to a complete stop.

"Careful, Lambchop." She spat a tooth into the cupholder. A pearlescent fang glimmered in her feigned smile. "One wrong move and I'll have enough to claim self-defense."

"Ask for trouble and you shall receive."

"You wouldn't dare."

She had handcuffs somewhere on her person, but I didn't trust my skills—or her compliance—enough to ask her to retrieve them. Instead, I instructed her to unbuckle, put her hands on her head, then, once I was sure no one was coming, exit the vehicle. She wasn't trustworthy, not even on an empty road with her phone and firearm removed and on the dash. I also couldn't risk her contacting Augustin La Motte before I arrived.

Never considered myself barbaric, but as her feet touched the ground I altered my aim and shot her through the back of her right knee. The woman screamed and fell against the wildflowers.

“I’ll call this in as a werewolf taken out by a sheep,” I promised, sliding into the driver’s side as she writhed and cursed and rolled onto her back. Blood stained her jeans and pooled into the weeds. I slammed the door on her angry, pale face.

A safe distance away, I called Jorge to get access to the address August and Caelan had been sent to. Plugged the number into my phone’s GPS, figured out how to turn the lights on, and twenty minutes later was crossing the Avon border into Simsbury.

Rachel Walker lived in a woodsy spot on a quiet cul-de-sac of upper middle class homes. Hers was a two story blue colonial at the top of the curve, landscaped with a brick driveway and small, flowering shrubs. Well-maintained. Relaxing. A ‘leave your work at the door’ kind of home. In the middle of the afternoon, the street was quiet. Caelan’s truck was already there, pulled in front of her garage. Conspicuous, then again, she had witnessed a horrific event. It wasn’t unexpected to see police.

Her door was unlocked when I tried the handle. The home was quaint and picturesque: warm browns on the floor and peachy walls.

“Rachel?” I called. Given August’s intention, a loud interruption seemed the better alternative to slinking around.

No answer.

I moved into the kitchen, stopping at the counter, where an owl-shaped mug of coffee was ice cold.

“Caelan?”

“Oh, fucking hell.” August grabbed and hauled me into the living room, past leather furniture and a glass coffee table. He pushed me onto a plush, oriental carpet, set his foot on my back so I couldn’t stand and hollered at an open slider leading to the back deck. “Get your ass inside, bro!”

It was futile, but I attempted to push myself onto my knees. “Where’s Rachel?”

“Where’s Winny?”

“Where she deserves to be.”

He ground his heel into my spine.

Caelan acted a lightning rod for the tension between us as he entered. His hands were free of blood, but when he saw me, he looked away and I

knew she was dead. The weight of August's boot lightened, but I collapsed back against the carpet, disgusted, angry.

"How could you?"

"You are an exception, not the rule." He moved to help me stand.

I scrambled off the floor before he could reach me. "Was she alive when you arrived?"

"August slipped tetrodotoxin into her coffee earlier today."

"Did you a favor," the sheriff of Louisiana snorted. "Shouldn't've."

"There nothing you can do but comfort measures at that dosage, Marcy."

August's cell rang. He shoved me onto the nearest chair, phone pressed to his ear, then dragged his brother in front of me. "You fucking keep your claws on this sheep, you hear? Win, hun, where are you?" He disappeared into the kitchen.

Caelan didn't move as I marched into his personal space, lifting my hand to cup his cheek and keep him from skirting my gaze. His face was hot, feverish. "Did you kill Rachel?"

He swallowed hard, catching my hand and pulling it down. "She was suffering. There was nothing left to do."

Glass smashed against the kitchen wall.

I cringed.

Caelan's grip on my hand tightened. "I don't know what you did to get here, but I'm going to assume it was dumb. Get the hell back in the truck."

"You wanted me to pour water on this fire," I asserted.

"Told you, Marcy, there was no winning this one. It's over. Leave before you get hurt." He pulled me toward the door. I wrenched free of his grasp. If I was a Were, I'd have exploded in anger.

"I'm not afraid to face the consequences of my actions or my decisions."

August stood beside a framed picture of the doctor and her parents. He flicked it onto the ground with a finger.

"You shot her with silver," he growled, advancing. "You left her keeled over on the side of the road like a fucking opossum!"

"Warned you not to call her a sheep, August."

"She's alive."

Caelan's disappointment in my response was palpable. I pushed past him to confront his brother.

“I could tolerate your stinking human body for the duration of the case, I could.” Caelan's older brother ran his hands over his head and emerged with fistfuls of dark hair. “But interdepartmental violence cannot go unanswered.”

“Neither should violence against humans. Winona deserved worse than I gave her.”

August struck. Before I knew what hit me, I was flat on my back spitting blood. Caelan positioned himself between us, hand on his weapon as he braced the other against the strained buttons of his brother's shirt.

“You okay, Marcy?” he called over his shoulder.

“Stay out of this!” I snapped, wiping my mouth. “You didn't help Rachel. You don't get to help me.”

Worry in his eyes, Caelan lifted his hand off his gun. “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

I touched my mouth, tasted blood on my fingertips. It was then I noticed the thunk-thunk of pale flesh piling beside my outstretched feet. Skin sloughed off Sheriff La Motte's arm and out through the cuff of his sleeve, staining his shirt, dribbling down lengthening, hairy fingers.

chapter 22

CONSEQUENCES

August's face bulged and contorted, warping his countenance into twisted, peeling flesh. Steam slid through the cracks in his skin, masking the transition.

"Marcy, I do not recommend this." Caelan's voice was an anxious echo in my eardrums as I regained my footing. Winona's loaded semi-automatic took the place of my grandmother's weapon, but while my fingers itched to grab it, I stayed still.

"I'll survive." August was vulnerable in the transition, but I wasn't taking the cheap shot, not when I aimed to show some figurative backbone.

"You might not."

Nonetheless, at my insistence Caelan stepped aside. His single, fluid movement acted as the flag to start the match.

The half-formed wolf lunged on human legs. I threw myself to one side. Claws hooked into my collarbone and wrenched me onto my back. My head hit the table. Dark fur and shredded fabric filled my vision. I pushed against it, but he batted my hand away, tearing his claws across my chest in the process. I kicked him hard in his rippling stomach. The pressure released. August knelt over me, panting, growling, ripping off his ear to reveal a new, furry one underneath before what was left of his fingers fused into massive paws. He rolled his shoulders backward, spine cracking. Skin dripped onto my waist as the wolf emerged.

I managed to get one leg free and kicked him in the balls. He grunted, jerked back.

Caelan smashed a lamp over his brother's head. The wolf yelped and fell sideways, bursting free of the last clinging bits of humanity.

My ears rang. I pulled myself up. The corners of my vision browned

and spotted until I was standing in a smoking tunnel with August's amber eyes a searing hellfire at its end.

Shaking his head, the wolf scabbled upright, shards of porcelain bright in his fur.

I reached back for the gun.

"Nope!" Caelan forced me hard against the wall, yanked open the front door, and dragged me through. "You're done."

He slammed it shut, but not before I caught a glimpse of stiff fur and bared fangs.

My world spun. My hand dropped off the gun. A hot rush trickled down my wrist and into my palm. Blood poured through the sweater and shirt. My tunnel vision flickered and quaked.

"Oh, shit." I staggered into the nearest shrub. "I'm a river!"

"You're okay." Caelan held my arm. Or my waist. Something. I didn't feel anything except dizzy.

"Well, I've never had this much come out of me before, and let me tell you, I've had some monster periods." Come to think of it, Mother Nature should've come calling days ago. Probably would have, if werewolves, creatures I'd always thought operated on a cyclical (if not fictitious) schedule, hadn't gone and traumatized mine.

"Buckle up," Caelan was saying, interrupting my thoughts.

I stared at the seat belt on my right, unsure if I was sitting in the truck because I'd climbed in myself or because he'd put me there. Either way, the belt refused to cooperate with my injury. Caelan strapped me in.

"August?" I asked with belated alarm.

"We're mindful killing machines. He won't charge out in broad daylight."

"I'm taking his keys," I decided, patting my sweater pocket. Immediately Caelan's hand dove into said pocket, fishing out my prize. I frowned. "Hey!"

"You want him picking these up?" His amber gold eyes were every bit as wild as his brother's, but his voice was mellow, soothing, as he touched my sweater. "Let's see what you've got going on."

I batted his hand away and removed the sweater myself. Lifting the shirt, I peeked at the damage. "Okay," I whistled, pressing my sweaty forehead against the window. The sweater I balled and held firm against the wound. "That's bone."

"I'll get you to an ER."

"We had a doctor," I hissed. "You murdered her."

A part of me wanted him to challenge me, wanted the chance to tear into him and his kind for everything, but it never materialized. He turned his attention on the road and got us the hell off Rachel's street.

"Where do you want me to bring you?" he asked, tone stiff and clipped.

Lisa's apartment address danced on the tip of my tongue, followed by 'home', but those weren't realistic options. "Where do packs go to get healed?"

"If a major injury were to occur, trouble with a birth, loss of limb, stuck silver, etcetera, they call in a healer or a shaman."

"Well I don't know any healers, and I'm not going to see Harry Styles or whoever it was we interviewed."

"Harry Shan."

"Yeah. I'm not letting him poke around in me. Or Zakar." The mere thought of him returned the dreams, this time of bites in tender places and licked ribbons of blood. I shivered. "Especially not Zakar. Ingram Hayes might be the Second Head, but Zakar is the First. He's the dealer in the painting. He's the first man in my dreams."

"We could've had him," Caelan said, and came again a frustrated growl to his tone.

"We will. Right now, take me to Cal," I decided. A quick conversation with Talon pack's alpha and she'd promised (between several curse words) to have a physician ready.

As I lifted the sweater to see if anything had clotted, Caelan rolled his window down and took a big gulp of fresh air. "Can you not?" His voice strained to stay coherent. His knuckles were white against the steering wheel.

"What are you, a vampire?" I retorted, touching the back of his nearest hand. With my finger I made a bloody smiley. He took one look at the mark and pulled the truck onto the road's shoulder.

"Blood turns you on doesn't it? I can see it." Wiping my fingers, I stroked his forearm. "I can feel the fire underneath your skin."

"Wouldn't call it a turn on. August pissed me off. The sight of you wounded ...If you were capable of driving yourself, I would have taken the paw that did it and more."

"How can someone be bred to kill?"

He closed his eyes for a couple breaths before regarding at me. "Your cat was bait for dog fighting. Do you know more about the process, Marcy?"

"Miss Davins," I corrected him coolly, shifting in my seat. No position was comfortable. Everything from my neck to my breasts throbbed. "No, I don't. Never been exposed to worse than newspapers and TV segments."

"Are you alright listening for a couple minutes? If not, I can keep driving."

"I'm cool." I brushed the sticky fabric adorning my shoulder. "Not bad, right?"

"Right." His reassuring smile wavered. "Wolves have roamed North America for thousands of years. Our ancestors were wolves before they were cursed to share the shape of our competitors. Different strains rose on different continents at different times in different species, but mine turned first. Vengeful god, lunar goddess, migrations, aliens: doesn't matter how we arrived. Our ancestors didn't keep records. We are here, and we've been here in the shadows since our four-legged kin went extinct."

"What does this have to do with dog fighting?"

"The more advanced humans got, the harder it became to live alongside them. Humans killed what they feared."

The first strain had seen what change had wrought upon their numbers, knew how important it was to keep our people safe. Known for loyalty and brute strength, they dedicated themselves to protecting our kind around the world. Eventually, as humanity flourished, Otherfolk of all kinds sought protection, and the Otherworld Society came into existence. Truth faded to rumor to myth to bedtime stories and silver screens. We are born for this, always bred faster, stronger, smarter, larger to compete and complete any task asked of us. The weak are culled. Reapers surrender their futures to ensure Weres have a future."

"So you serve the Otherworld?"

"We protect our kind no matter the cost, take care of whatever business is asked of us so the rest can live in peace. I don't enjoy it, but I do it. And the community stays safe."

"And the fighting?" Regripping my sweater, I winced and pressed harder on the claw marks. Caelan watched the gesture with undivided attention. I had to clear my throat to get him to continue.

"Thousands of years of conflict darkens my blood. It's who I am. The

sheriffs, reapers, if you prefer, after today,"—he flashed a somber smile —“we're the ones who completed training. Join or die." I studied the serpent on his arm with renewed interest. The sheriff stared out beyond the windshield into undisturbed woodland. “I didn't even know I could be human until an opposing wolf ripped the silver out of my back. Almost died on the spot until I realized I could switch between forms at will. The wolf comes first, we're taught."

“Some choice."

“They bait you with humans and non-prospects," he continued. “Starved, beaten, chained in a filthy corner. . . For years killing is the only relief.” He smiled to himself. “I remember this older, retired sheriff destroyed me during a test for gameness. Crushed my front leg in his jaws, ripped it from the joint, tore a ligament in my hind leg. I was on two legs but I continued dragging across the floor straight for him, desperate to taste his blood on my tongue, until I lost too much of my own to move."

During his story my hand crept to my mouth, and stayed there as he finished. I was so angry with him for what he did to Rachel, but a part of me felt sorry for him. Choices are easy when you weren't the one making them.

“Why, Caelan?”

“They don't trust you to do the job unless you've proven yourself. And if you clear the pit, you learn to speak and make friends and do all the things the humans do, but you don't see yourself as one of them."

“But you are."

“Skin is our disguise, Marcy. You grow up having hunted these weak, naked snacks for years. We're encouraged to think of ourselves separate, from everything and everyone. I thought the same, until I was released into the wild and started interacting with y'all. I should've been retired once they realized I had strayed, but the gameness that got me out of the pit helps me kill a lot of monsters. I ain't called the King of Graves for nothing."

“You were called Big Spoon for something," I thought suddenly. “I want to hear that."

He turned red. “Not now," he said.

“Fine," I said. “Hey, you said you bite to kill. How does your line carry on then?”

“That ain't entirely true. We bite to turn once. It's a controlled process. Should we happen to impress our superiors, we are retired and get assigned a mate with optimal genes who is born one of us, or selected and

given to us to turn. Females of my kind rarely survive the pits, if they're put in at all."

I grimaced, and not just from pain. "Calico is right about your kind. They're horrible people."

"We're not people, Miss Davins." He rubbed his face, not seeming to notice my blood smeared on his forehead. "We're wolves who walk like men."

"Gram used to tell me there's no monsters in the woods, only men. Good and bad, I suppose."

We didn't say another word the entire drive to Calico's. I rested against the glass, distracting myself with the scenery.

Once we arrived, I didn't want Caelan's help, but in the waning afternoon sun I wasn't getting to the front door without his support. With his hand under my elbow, he walked me up the stairs and rang the doorbell, and turned.

I followed his progress with a wince. Damn, did my neck muscles hurt. "Not gonna pop inside?"

"And get my head chewed off?" He already had his keys in his fist. "I won't call on you for a couple days. If you're smart, when I do call, you'll be gone."

I braced myself on Cal's door, feeling woozy the longer I stood. "Say I go. What happens when they find out you let me slip away?"

"Won't matter to you at that point, will it?" He rubbed his knuckles, hesitating on the bottom stair. "Look, I'm real sorry about Rachel Walker. About Mila, James and everyone else. About you."

The door opened. Calico's lips pursed. "Oh, you mother—"

I sagged against Cal before she could chase the retreating sheriff. "Let him alone, Cal. He tried to stop me." But he'd also wanted me there, so the sore parts of me felt she was a teensy bit justified if she shrugged me off and dragged him into the orchard.

After a blistering stare at his back, the alpha drew me into a hug. "Oh, sugar, what's he done to you?"

"This was on me. I picked a fight with his brother." She hustled me past the kitchen and into a living room housing a painting of a distorted Picasso-styled woman. Authentic at first glance, but right now my eyes were for the couch: a plastic and towel covered loveseat across from the television. "He warned me to stay out of it."

Her hand fell on her hip. "Why the hell didn't you?"

I eased onto crinkling plastic. "Guess I should leave the fighting to the actual werewolves. It's unfair, you guys healing so quick." At a terrible thought, I sat back up. "Where's Mila? I don't want her to see this."

"She and Aiden are at the movies with Mina."

"Thank God. And this doctor, healer, whoever ... You trust them?"

"Listen, sugar." Cal laid her hand on my knee. Her smile was gentle, concerned, calming. "I'm not saying we're going to give you drugs you can't get from your doctor, but you aren't going to remember the rest of today. Close your eyes, rest. She'll be here soon. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Wait." I grabbed her hand. She raised an eyebrow. "Can you feed my cats and clean their litterbox?"

"Sounds like a suitable job for Harlowe."

The day passed in a series of blurry memories. I remembered a woman's bony fingers feeling around my shoulder. I thought I saw Mina's angry face in passing sometime later, and Mila might've slept snuggled into my side a while, but I had no idea what had happened or what stinky herbal remedies lurked underneath my bandages come morning. Hell, I had no idea how I'd gone from my clothes into a lacy nightgown and fluffy pink bathrobe.

"Don't pick at it," Calico warned, setting a plate of toast on the coffee table. In a trim business suit, she draped herself on an armchair across from me, ever composed.

I pulled my hands away from the bandage and picked up the plate. "Werewolves and humans do not mix."

Her dark brown eyes landed on mine. "What happened?"

I nibbled a corner of crust. "We were investigating a suspect when August arrived demanding Caelan finish an assignment. Long story short, they killed a woman, I shot his beloved deputy in the knee and he got even."

"You're lucky it wasn't worse. You'll need a week off to keep yourself from damaging the stitches, and no strenuous activities for a while after. You can stay here. Aiden loves having Mila around, and I make an attentive nurse," she purred. "I'll make you forget what ails you."

I tucked the bathrobe tighter around my body. "I'd prefer to be home."

She scowled. "With the hellcats?"

"Igor means well." I took another bite of toast after being certain she hadn't stuffed a pill into the strawberry jam. "Hey, how much do you know about reapers?"

About to toss me the TV remote, she hesitated. "Why do you ask?"

"Caelan told me what he came from. I want to know if it's true."

Her lips pursed. "They pull 'em out of the pits and teach them how to act. The ones who chose not to swing the scythe are dead and digested. He might think a little different, but different is still dangerous, and he didn't get out without being as nasty, or nastier, than the rest of the lot. He created and climbed over a mountain of bones to walk among us, Marcy. Never forget that."

Cal set the remote beside me and adjusted the sleeve of her suit. She looked sharp in dark grey, not that she could ever be dull. "I may have a piece of information for you. Before Stephen's death, I remember Jaz telling me someone came around the place one afternoon. I'll have him talk to you when he gets back from his trip."

"Where is he?"

"Antiques dealer in Rockport. Stephen collected old bikes. I have no use for them, but Jaz found a potential buyer." She rose to get coffee, and I leaned my head back into a towel-covered pillow, wondering if the pack I saw the night Stephen died had been alive or dead.

When Sunday rolled around I was mobile and less drugged, prepping Mila's bedroom for her arrival. Later in the week, better able to hide my obvious injury, I planned to see Lisa for lunch and a movie. As I took a breather from packing up art supplies, I checked my phone for messages. A couple new: Lisa, my boss asking if I wanted to pick up my last check or have it mailed, and the usual spam.

I cradled the phone against my ear, scratched Samson's chin, and dialed Gram's former partner.

"For someone I haven't seen since you were small, damn, your voice is an echo of Gen's. Always held a cautious unease, whether we were in the thick of things or she was telling the barista how much sugar in the coffee."

Samson's head bumped against my chest. "Who were you to Genessa?" I asked.

"A friend, fellow hunter. Ronan Delevant."

"The kind who hunts werewolves?"

"Yep."

"She never mentioned you."

"Gen knew you can't take our work home. She made an exception, once. Didn't work out for you, did it?"

Samson walked himself around my still hand with gentle nibbles and pawing to encourage my fingers back into his fur. "Did you know my grandfather?"

"War had changed him, she claimed. He saw real monsters and decided not to be one." The glassy thunk of a bottle on wood and the slosh of beer. "'Gen,' I says, 'the lone wolf makes for a handsome photograph in the cold, November twilight, but you don't invite him to dine beside your daughter at the table.' 'Course, listening wasn't her strong suit. Took years more than I thought, granted, but he snaps and in an hour her family, your family, is settling into their eternal rests, God bless their souls. She had a rhino's hide and temperament, but I don't wager she'd have survived losing you."

"You called yourself Ronan?"

"Yep."

"Were you there that night?"

"Yep."

I'd been thinking Gram may have called Tolbert to the scene. Could she have called this supposed hunter as well, or instead? "I'm sorry. I don't remember you there."

"You don't?" Surprise deepened his voice. "No, I suppose not. Left before you woke up. Excuse me, kiddo, I'm outta beer."

A couple minutes later, Ronan continued with his story.

"When'd you arrive?" I asked.

"Had to be past midnight. I was beard-deep in motel sheets when the phone rang. I was in the truck before I remembered to put pants on, that's how panicked Gen sounded." He paused. "The jobs are unique horrors, but the worst are mangled kids and my God, he ripped you good. Moment I saw you, shredded leg and all, I took the sheet off the top bunk and covered you. Gen yanked the thing straight off and put my hand against your throat and asked me to rush you to a shaman we'd done work for. He promised to heal you, but at the cost of Gen spending the rest of her life in service to him. I held your hand in mine all night while your grandma made arrangements to

move the bodies of your folks and sister. Changed guard with her in the morning to clean the scene. . .Still there, kiddo?. . .Rhetta?"

I hung up.

chapter 23

A FERAL SHADE OF AMBER

I dropped the phone on the counter and sank onto the floor. I heard the muffled crunch of bones in Grandpa's teeth, felt the shudder of the bed as Rhetta's limp body hit the mattress, saw again the werewolf's manic grin winding toward me.

The phone rang and rang. In a panic, I kicked it away.

When she'd pulled me and Samson out from beneath the bed, Gram made me close my eyes. I was too young and afraid to do anything but listen. I didn't know what she did while I waited in her car. I never saw Mom, Dad, Rhetta or my other grandparents again.

Ronan had to be lying.

Gram wouldn't.

How could she?

Why would she?

The answering machine kicked in. "I'm sorry if I spooked you, kiddo. I know it was a traumatic night. I'm sorry I ever brought it up. Please call me back. I owe it to Gen not to leave you this way. Something wicked's bled the south dry; now it's moving northeast."

Taking a deep breath, I called him back. "Sorry," I said. "It's been a long time since I've revisited the details of that night."

"Yeah, tough," he agreed. "Listen, kid, I don't got long, today or on this earth. Word along the grapevine is a necromancer's looking for you."

"Who's the grapevine?"

"They are who they are," he said.

"What's he want?" I asked, trying to keep my thoughts from careening off course. Ingram Hayes wasn't news to me, but Ronan didn't know that. In fact, he seemed to think Gram had raised me knowing all about

the Otherworld Society's denizens – probably thought I was a werewolf, too.

“He’s offering hunters and monsters alike a treasure chest from a sunken wreck to the one who brings you to him. Only requirement’s that your heart’s still beating. I was there that night with the shaman. I think you died and he brought you back, and I think the necromancer knows it. You’re about to get a hell of a lot of attention, Rhetta. I’m too old to help you these days, but I wanted you to know what’s coming. Now—”

“Wait!” I said in a rush. “There’s something you can help with. Gram never told me where she buried the bodies.”

“For good reason. Didn't want you troubled if your cover got blown. They're in a small cemetery outside Buckhorn Island state park, near Niagara Falls. Fellow by the name of Rowtag buries monster vics who can't go home and sometimes monsters themselves. Go and see him, Rhetta. The world don't want a necromancer disturbing the sleep of what's in his cemetery. He'd lend you a hand.”

We hung up. I sat on the ground, my legs freezing from the AC, the fridge humming nearby. I didn't know what to do, think, or say. While my grandmother might have trusted him, to me the man on the other end of the line was a stranger. Better to wait, I decided, dragging myself off the floor. Better to take a couple days to gather my thoughts and process what he'd told me.

But, a small vacation to upstate New York might be just what I needed.

For now, though, I had Mila to keep me company through recovery. The werewolf-in-miniature was more excited to see Samson than me, but her indomitable spirit was an inspiration.

A slow, languid week passed, complete with a trip to the movies with Lisa and Wyatt to catch a matinee about a ghost in the woods. Apart from Lisa noticing the lack of my usual flinch at the jump scares, I managed to fake my way through the flick and dinner after and felt shitty doing so. Lisa had been my best friend for years; sure, she never knew about my past life, but no one had. By the time we'd met, Marcy Davins was more than a

character: she was me.

I'd never lied to her about anything worse than the usual harmless stuff friends lie to each other about. These past few weeks felt like a betrayal of our friendship, but what could I do that wouldn't result in her death or serious injury except keep her at arm's length?

I was sad to see them leaving arm-in-arm in the opposite direction after saying our goodbyes in the restaurant parking lot, but happy they were safe. I got back in my car and got on the highway. The night was still young, the sun an aging light in the grey sky, when my car passed signs for West Hartford.

It was a poor decision, but at the last second I flipped on my blinker and took the exit. Promising myself I was only going to observe the outside, I parked in one of the big garages for the Shoppes at Nokhurst Crossing, walked past three blocks of busy stores and restaurants, and found a bench across the street from Zakar's shop. On the shopping district's fringe, his store's side of the street abutted a thin forest leading to a residential area. While it was quieter than the other areas, plenty of walkers trafficked the street underneath the rising spring moon.

Empty benches lined both sides of the street. After a brief detour for magazines and a bubble tea, I settled on a bench across the street, indirectly overlooking the black door and its jaguar etching. Sipping tea, flipping gossip-filled pages underneath a dingy streetlight, I allowed myself a moment of normality. Every so often, when a person neared the entry, I'd hold the magazine a little higher and peek over the top, but time and again the plain little door went ignored.

I didn't know what I was going to do if I saw someone go in.

Hell, I didn't know what I'd do if Zakar came out.

I promised myself I'd leave when it grew too dark and the foot traffic thinned, but as the time neared, a black truck parked in front of the shop. I turned away into the bench so fast, searing pain clawed through my healing wound.

But it was Caelan, not August, who stepped out of the vehicle. Abandoning my reading material, I crossed the street and sidled up behind him. "Evening, sheriff."

There wasn't even the hint of a smile on his face when he realized who'd addressed him. He rubbed his temple. "Miss Davins. Why are you here?"

I couldn't explain to him how I felt drawn to be here when the smarter part of me wanted to get the hell away, or at least change outfits. Nice clothes got ruined around werewolves, and here I was, in my favorite pair of jeans and a cold-shoulder top I was fond of. Impractical stakeout attire.

I jiggled my cup. "I was thirsty."

"Not smart."

"That's dehydration for you," I mumbled, poking a tapioca pearl with my straw. "Why are you here?"

"I'm going to—Doesn't matter. I'd planned on addressing you tomorrow, but since you're here..."

He stepped around me and popped the passenger door. A large bag sat on the seat cushion. At his word I reached within. Plush white fur grazed my fingertips.

"Stephen's pelt," he explained. "Return it to Cal and book your plane ticket."

He waited for me to grab the bag, but I left it in place. "Are you going inside?"

"Are you?" he countered.

"Might, now that you're here," I declared, wondering what he'd do to stop me.

"Now that I'm here, you're going to march that pelt to Mrs. Finn. She visited the station the day after your attack. Scared my secretary out of her skin, she was so angry. Had to buy my entire office supper to apologize."

I paused. "Packs are family, right?"

"For the most part."

"And the pack protects the pack first and foremost."

"Above all else." Amber eyes curious, he moved me aside and shut the truck door. "Why're you asking?"

"I took a call from a hunter who worked with my grandmother. He seems to think the necromancer wants my sister."

Frowning at Zakar's door, Caelan offered his hand. I accepted, and together we took a stroll down the street. "According to you, she's already in his realm," he said.

"Actually, there's a chance she's on our side of the dirt." It was important not to get my hopes up, but I couldn't stave off the excitement.

"How do you figure?"

We slowed our meandering to allow a couple of college-age students

to pass. They headed further down the road toward a local bar advertising a rooftop party. Once they'd passed out of earshot, I spoke.

"A friend of my grandmother's described how he brought Rhetta to a shaman after Gramps mauled her. The shaman saved her, which means Rhetta, if she's alive, is a werewolf. And who do Gram and I move in beside? Just a pack big on adoptions, which could mean I'm a blood relation to the pack." My stomach ached with anger, resentment, and happiness.

Though his hand in mine remained, Caelan pulled himself away to better regard me. "If Cal knows you're technically family, that explains her aggressive protection of you."

With my free hand I swirled the last few pearls in my drink. "I grew up thinking my sister was dead, wishing I still had her, and there we were playing in the same forest, me in the sun and her under the moon."

"So your grandmother kept you hidden from humans, the Otherworld Society, and your sister. She also kept your sister hidden from humans, you, and the Otherworld Society except a select few."

"She'd need to live with werewolves to learn how to be one, so someone had to know," I said. "There's a lot I have to ask him about. I didn't tell him I wasn't Rhetta, though."

"Good." We'd nearly reached the bar. I trashed my drink. The music thumped loud and upbeat. From here, Zakar's end of the street seemed draped in quiet gloom. "Who was the hunter?"

"Ronan Delevant. Don't quote me on this, but I get the sense she may have squashed the monogamy bug early on in life."

Caelan spun me easy to the music, then with a tug I was against him, his arm was around my shoulders and we were walking back up the street. "So you're trusting the word of a former lover?"

"If he can get the name of the shaman, I don't care if she married him on the side."

"Why haven't you asked him already?"

"Finding out Rhetta might be alive is enough for one night," I admitted. "I'm scared to believe him, then find out she's not. He gave me the general address for my parents' graves. A cemetery in upstate New York. If I go, I'll know for sure whether Rhetta's with them."

"Might could be a trap." He waved to the truck. "Take the pelt and talk to Mrs. Finn. If your sister passed through the pack, she'll know."

"I could've had my sister," I said, stopping to watch a plane's course

through the growing starlight.

“You’ve always had your sister,” Caelan replied, letting me go. “Go find her. I’ll be paying you a visit in the morning.”

“Not yet,” I said, nodding at the black door.

“You ain’t invited.”

“Is August?”

He paused a little too long. “He’s momentarily tied up. Belzer doesn’t believe a hound should eat the hare being used to lure big game.”

“And Winnie?”

“After Ingram Hayes and his lot are resolved, you and I will be splitting that bill,” he said, opening the door to the truck to offer the pelt one last time. “Now, if you’ll please excuse me, I’d like to be getting on.”

I closed the door for him. “What’s the plan?”

“Interview with a monster at nine, then my schedule is well and truly clear.”

“I hope your conscious isn’t.”

He frowned.

Together, we headed into the rippling twilight that was Zakar’s shop. The stung lights had been dimmed and there were fewer candles than when last we’d visited. Any light remaining glowed orange while the shadows on the tented ceiling glittered with false stars. The setting felt intimate in an uncomfortable way. The shop reeked of amber and leather, of musk and dirty sex and unspoken ritual.

“Oh, sheriff, you’ve brought me a delightful surprise this evening,” a mellow, cheery voice rang out from the darkness. Zakar, dressed in similar attire as when we’d first met (in-person, anyway), stepped out from behind the hidden door. “What a pleasant surprise it is to see you again, Deputy Davins.”

He took my hand. His beard tickled my wrist as he pressed his lips against my pulse, watching me through twinkling emerald eyes.

“Miss Davins, please.”

He made a deep-throated “oh” sound delightfully naughty. One blonde eyebrow lifted. “Trouble in paradise?”

I looked over my shoulder at Caelan. The sheriff’s frown flickered in the candlelight. “I’m tired of pretending.”

“Aren’t we all?” Zakar purred, pulling out a chair for each of us. He seated himself at the opposite end, just beside the hidden door. The trick

wouldn't work a second time; he appeared to acknowledge that fact by leaving it slightly ajar. He set his elbows on the table, folded his hands together and cradled his chin. "Humans are fantastic pretenders. The very best, I'd wager. Do you know what else they are?"

"Curious," I said coyly, reclining.

The shaman smiled, spreading his arms wide. "You're in luck, Miss Davins, for I am here tonight to satisfy your every curiosity."

"Regardless of what she's calling herself today, that's my deputy you're addressing." Caelan was not near as interested or relaxed as he set his notebook on the table and sat.

Zakar's eyes narrowed on Caelan. "Pardon me, sheriff. I have the utmost respect for men and women of the law. In fact, I am a platinum sponsor of the CPA's Haunted Hallows Ball, not to brag. Now, Miss Davins, a little birdie told me you're the department's first human. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Not for much longer, though, according to Otherworld custom. A shame, that." He pouted a moment, then gestured at display with an oxidized, gilded mirror and several dried florals. Reflected back were only the barest shadows, his tall and thin and looming, mine an indeterminate splotch against the dust. "Did you know humans are the only species capable of being turned into other things?"

"The Eevee of our world," I decided. Caelan's expression was blank as he asked what an Eevee was. "Little fuzzy Pokémon? Turns into a different element depending on what stone you touch it with?"

He shook his head.

I opened my mouth to tease him, when I remembered what his childhood had entailed. "Show you later," I promised.

Zakar traced his nail along an inky fleur de lis on the table's patterned cloth. "I was thinking more uncut fabric. A wolf, a fox, a cat, a bat: the shape depends on who holds the scissors. Humans are wells of untapped magic, which is why we make good conduits." His eyes met mine across the table. "And why the worst of us make strong necromancers."

"Is that what you are?" I asked.

He leaned back with a musical laugh. "I prefer 'Le devin du village.' Or healer, or shaman. I read the needs and help those who ask, be they human, werewolf, or something else. Allow me to demonstrate. Your hand, Deputy." Zakar reached across the table, palm up.

Recalling the last time, I moved my chair until I was knee to knee with Caelan.

“Only if you want to,” he murmured.

“That’s right.” Zakar’s voice made for a pleasant echo. “Only if you want to, Marcy.”

His hand was warm. He spread my palm flat, rubbed his thumb over the creases in a way that bordered between sensual and studious. “You are positively electric, tonight.” He pushed faintly on my scar. “And tense, so very tense.”

I hated everything about the process, and yet couldn't help but imagine what magic he'd work across my skin were his hand to slide beneath my shirt, to grab my breast and kiss me hungry...

Caelan flipped the edge of my hair with his pen. “Marcy?”

A bucket of ice water drenched my imagination. I jumped, shivered as if soaked. “What?”

“Do you need to step outside?”

“I’m fine,” I lied, rubbing goosebumps away.

“Marcy is a bundle of unreleased potential. Her needs are quite obvious,” Zakar purred, walking his fingertips back to his side of the table. “Give me five minutes in the back, my dear, and I could provide you with some relief. Fifteen minutes, and you’ll be cured.”

“Much obliged if you would refrain from harassing Miss Davins.”

“Would if I could.” Zakar sighed. “Over sparks that fly, I’ve no control.”

“I won’t ask so kind next time.”

“Understood.”

“I, um,” I stuttered, feeling weightless on a cloud, and the angel who’d carried me there was green-eyed and dark of wing. “Whatever that was, don’t do it again.”

Zakar’s well-timed smile tipped. He rose from his chair to stand behind me. “Show me your hand again, Marcy. I won’t touch it.”

At Caelan’s nod, I flipped my palm back upon the table.

Leaning between Caelan and I, he made his point inches above my palm. “I see the power in your lines here, and here. You’re a daughter of the cunning folk. The pulse of magic in your veins draws me, as mine does you,” he continued in a husky tone against my ear.

“You’ll find I’m drawn elsewhere,” I said.

“Then allow me to change your mind with a glimpse of the other side.” He kissed my neck.

From the moment his lips touched my throat, my body became a deadweight for pleasure. I couldn't raise my hand or flinch away. My body wanted whatever he wanted, however he wanted it, happy to be touched, to be played with.

“Enough!” At the snap of Caelan's voice I had possession of myself again and Zakar was on his ass. I rubbed the shaman's touch away, wary now as he grinned up at me from the floor.

“*Ouch*, sheriff.” A shallow seam of blood spilt his cheek.

After wiping his hand on the tablecloth, Caelan cracked his knuckles back into proper human form. I didn't realize he could shift so fast, let alone restrict the change to a singular section of his body.

“Shall I take him downtown?” he asked me, settling back in his chair.

Zakar pulled himself up on one of his display stands. “You know, that sort of uncouth behavior isn't going to get you what you want.”

“Go on and put your eyes on my hand, then,” Caelan said, laying his inked forearm on the table. “Or, we could take a trot back and see if you can meet my needs.”

“Another time.” Zakar said through a thin smile. Blood discolored the side of his beard. “I've got wounds to lick.” He winked at me as he spoke. “Allow me to hurry you on your way. I don't know who ordered what at Bayberry General, but I know the what that ordered the who.”

“And that is...?” I prompted.

He dusted the sleeve of his coat and returned to his chair. “It's whispered by some to go by the name of wendigo. A spirit possessing a man, using this body full of potential—” Zakar's eyes shone wide and luminous. Again, as if spurred by toxic, carnal impulses, an unwanted thrill raced through my veins. “—to conduct magic to its dark wishes. Speaking of hunger, your touch has got me positively ravenous, Marcy.”

“Killing a man is easy, but there's no killing a spirit,” Caelan said, glancing sideways at me. “We'll have to trap it.”

Zakar nodded. “I'm not saying Ingram Hayes has or has not sought assistance from a talented shaman such as myself, but, in my travels I've collected a number of manuscripts on true dark magic. One must be prepared, after all, for the rare circumstance in which a dog chooses to bite its master's hand. I have accounts of ancient Algonquians themselves, and methods of

containment those in the most desperate of situations have found successful.” He lowered his voice, looking for once uncomposed and nervous. “There’s a book in my office. I’m certain the sheriff has his references, but speed is of the—”

A pale, monstrous arm burst through the fabric of the hidden door, sunk claws into his throat and wrenched the man through.

I tumbled off the chair in my rush to get away from the table. Caelan hauled me upright as Zakar’s screams dragged further and further down the passageway.

“You have your gun, Marcy?”

I patted the new holster I’d bought myself to hide under my shirt. “Silvered.”

He pushed me toward the silken fabric. “Find out where they’re headed. I’m just behind.”

I stepped into the darkness. Ahead, light dimmed in the shape of a closing door. My footsteps echoed down the concrete passage as I ran past a stone staircase winding to the basement, another door, and out to the back of the building. Gun in my hand, I pushed open the door.

A dumpster lay illuminated by a lone, flickering light. Zakar’s long fingers clung to the side of the dumpster. The man’s green eyes met mine, wide and full of fear, as a dark gray wolf held his thigh in its jaws and was attempting to violently rip him free. The muscles in the animal’s shoulders tensed; its huge paws strained against the ground as it tugged once, then twice more.

Behind me, Caelan barreled through the exit.

Upon spotting the sheriff, the grey wolf started to pull harder and faster.

I ran wide, taking aim, when a white blur smashed into my side, sent me flying across the pavement. The gun skipped out of reach. I stretched for it as the werewolf—the pale one who’d first grabbed him, small and two-legged—took off at a sprint.

It didn’t get far, unbalanced by some type of leg injury. It reached the edge of the pavement when the sheriff clamped down on its arm below the shoulder and drove the monster hard into the ground.

At a shout, I turned. Zakar’s grip gave way. The gray wolf improved its grip and dragged the kicking, screaming man into the woods.

Unsure if I’d be pursuing alone, I checked on Caelan.

He stood atop the white werewolf, a mutated animal snarling and struggling to free itself from the larger sheriff, who had trapped it on its side and begun the process of rolling it onto its back. The wolf's dark paws dug into its ivory fur as he regripped to sink his fangs nearer and nearer its throat, rendering flesh from bone with near mechanical precision.

From my vantage point, I caught a good glimpse of the animal's swollen belly and the weak leg that had hampered its escape.

It was missing a chunk of calf muscle.

My heart bottomed into my stomach.

Pained blue eyes met mine. Rhetta extended one clawed hand toward me, then Caelan got her throat and her howl was mangled rage.

I screamed his name, screamed much worse as I ran at them. I threw my arms around him, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck to pull him away, but the sheriff's jaws were locked around his prey.

"Stop!" I pleaded, digging my nails into one flattened ear.

With a snarl his fangs burrowed deeper.

"You can't, Caelan! You can't!"

His teeth closed on empty air millimeters from my face. Surprised, I fell back on my ass. His shoulders hunched, his ears rounded as if checking to see I was okay.

Then the she-wolf landed a swipe across his jaw and kicked free. She lurched forward, one hand covering her gushing neck, and stumbled into the night.

The sheriff moved to reclaim his prey. I tackled him, tried to. Leading with my shoulder, I hit with the impact of a moth on a bug zapper. In a flash he slammed me into the pavement, dripping muzzle inches from my throat. One massive paw pushed into my chest, compressing my lungs, bending my ribs.

"Caelan," I gasped, pushing against his weight.

His lips curled back to reveal glistening fangs. There wasn't any part of him left in those feral amber eyes.

chapter 24

BRICK AND MORTAR HORROR

My world was pressure. With every wheeze, sensation tingled and faded, until all I felt was hot breath on my neck and a cold constriction around my heart.

I laid my hand on the base of his slick chin, cupped the crimson jaw and coughed, “Don't!” against his rising snarl. “Don't—don't kiss me like this, Caelan.”

The wolf's head jerked back in surprise. Weight lifted off my chest. His paw lengthened into padded fingers. Fur and blood fell around us in a dark snowstorm, until I couldn't see, but felt the way his hand flexed and twisted as bones shifted into human proportion.

When it was over, I propped myself onto one elbow, gasping and brushing sticky fur from my face. Expressionless, Caelan cracked his neck and looked down. I followed his gaze onto the bloody palm preventing me from sitting up fully.

“Good thing I don't have an overbearing father figure at home,” I coughed, wiping my lips.

He pulled his red hand away and got to his feet.

I dusted off and retrieved the gun, hoping he didn't notice how my hand shook slipping it into the holster.

He surveyed the blood spatter. Strips of white fur glistened in the carmine spray. “Why'd you stop me, Marcy?”

Cars honked and people talked and for a moment our brick and mortar horror stood outside time. It was hard to believe this could happen today. How could no one notice? The answer, at least, part of it, turned and repeated his question.

“Why'd you stop me?”

“It was her, Caelan. It was Rhetta.” Blood speckled my open-shoulder top, where my skin went unprotected against the pavement, but it was nothing worse than a scrape. I rolled it backward with wince. “Those were Talon’s pack members. The white wolf was Mina. I’m guessing the one who hauled Zakar off was Jaz, her husband, or mate, or whatever you call it.”

“Either is appropriate. Wolves don’t have a word. Humans applied it to our species; werewolves adopted the term.” He surveyed the distant tree line. “How confident are you?”

“That it’s Rhetta? Gramps had hands. Mina has hands. Gramps tore a chunk out of her calf. Mina’s missing a chunk. I’m not too sure about the eyes and hair. Rhetta had brown hair and brown eyes, same as mine. Does being a werewolf change them?”

“No.”

“Might not be her,” I conceded. “But Mina is definitely pregnant, and that werewolf was carrying. She’s due soon.”

“So this third-trimester werewolf was what, tailing you on Cal’s behalf?”

“What were you planning to do with Zakar tonight?”

“He agreed to discuss Bayberry General.”

“That’s your second foiled interview. Is it possible someone thought you were going to reap Zakar this evening?”

“Wouldn’t need much reason to,” he muttered. “Why?”

“Here’s the thing, when I met Mina—God, it’s been so long, could I really have forgotten her face?—Cal mentioned how much she and Jaz had gone through to bring this baby into the world. Zakar is listed, among his other titles, as a fertility doctor. What if he helped them get pregnant? What if he’s necessary for the baby’s safe delivery? If word reached Mina and Jaz you were visiting tonight, they may have hustled over to stop you from killing him.”

The sheriff laid a hand on his bare hip and raised his eyebrows. “Plausible, but you’ve never seen Mina shift, have you?”

“I know her eyes,” I insisted. “Speaking of eyes, it’s kind of hard to stay focused on yours strolling around as you are.”

Taking care to give me a wide berth, he walked the length of the puddled blood. “An injury like that should have killed a slight little thing like her. In fact, I’m almost certain I snapped her neck on the takedown. When you factor in where my teeth went, she shouldn’t have moved two feet, let

alone up and fled. Thought she might've been undead, but she doesn't have the stink about her."

"She's living for two. You ever seen what a pregnant human can do? As a werewolf, I bet she'd be able to lift a bus." Adrenaline, fear and a few other concerns had me running my mouth into chatty echoes as we reentered the back hall. "You think she's okay? Is she going to lose the baby?"

"Zakar wasn't killed," Caelan drawled, trying to steer me back on track or hoping he could. "Whether or not Mrs. Finn is involved, Mina will likely return home. If Zakar is working with Ingram, even if he ain't, as a host to that *thing*, he might could bring her house down."

The beginnings of achy hoarseness formed in my throat. As the sheriff searched out a light switch, I rubbed my neck, thinking about the damage he'd done to the white she-wolf. "How long will it take her injury to heal?"

"Few hours. Maybe less, considering her ability to survive damage she's sustained so far. There's something wrong there."

"Ronan had indicated Ingram was offering a fortune for her; maybe survivability was part of the reason." The light flipped on. I squinted at the illuminated hall until my eyes had adjusted. Bloody scraps of human smeared the floor and walls in spots. "How do babies survive a mother's shift?"

His disinterest in answering a barrage of questions was made clear with a stern frown. "They don't, not usually. If a woman is planning on motherhood, she chooses a skin, these days almost always human. The lack of shifting we refer to as mandatory den rest. The baby can shift limbs inside the womb; it's unpleasant, but survivable on the mother's side."

He pulled back the hidden door and bowed me through. The sheriff's clothing lay torn on the floor near the upturned table and a disgusting pile of skin, further evidence the wolf could explode through if he wanted.

I wrinkled my nose. "Every time I start feeling attracted to you, we take another trip to gore city."

"You can't get past a little mess? Not even in this charming atmosphere?" He gestured toward the multitude of candles and incense.

I pulled off my stained shirt and browsed the clothing section until I managed to locate a plain black men's tee printed with the shop's jaguar head on the front. It was ugly, but better than nothing.

I offered a larger size to Caelan, who had stopped whatever he was doing to watch me keenly, but he shook his head. Phone in one hand, he

tossed me his keys from the remnants of his pants pocket. “Mind getting the duffle bag out of the backseat?”

“You must spend a stupid amount of money on clothes and personal care items,” I told him on my return, hefting his heavy bag onto the now-righted table.

“Buy 'em wholesale,” he agreed, one hand covering the phone as he addressed me. “That’s why I hate ruining my nicer attire. I’m going to find a bathroom. See to it the place doesn't burn.”

Zakar’s was an elegant viper of a shop, filled with purpose and more power than I cared to imagine.

Strolling the winding aisles, I blew out a couple candles, stopping at a small display of several bronze and obsidian ritual bowls. Beside it, a locked glass cabinet displayed several small knives. Many were labeled as silvered or forged silver. Weak material. Flimsy, breakable. Not intended for most practical purposes.

Still.

What if I didn't have a gun next time? If I ran out of bullets? Or if there was a chance to level the playing field by halting someone’s transformation? I’d proven a poor shot, with the exception of a few close-range, dishonorable hits.

Checking to see if Caelan had returned—he hadn't—I took a paperclip off an invoice at the register, picked the cabinet lock, removed a three-inch silvered knife and wrapped it in my stained shirt.

Footsteps echoed through the hidden passage.

Holding the bundled package a careful casual, I retreated beside the table as Caelan emerged. Rust streaked his neck here and there, but overall he'd done a fair job in removing the blood. The fresh set of clothes helped.

“I've sent officers to Mrs. Finn’s. I assume you're tagging along?”

“My car's in the parking garage. Much as I don't want to pay for overnight, I'd rather leave now than hoof it back there.”

“Not a problem,” he agreed. “Back door's secure. I'll rope off the front before we leave. We have to extinguish the damn fire hazards first. Why the blazes would anyone waste time lighting all this crap?” He took the left side of the shop after I volunteered to take the side with the missing knife. As the room plunged into murky darkness, we met in the middle at the altar.

“Thought you might've killed me back there,” I admitted, dropping a candle snuffer over burning wicks. The price tag dangled off the silver

handle. "I'm shocked I was able to talk sense into you."

"You didn't talk me down, Miss Davins." He leaned across the last dancing flame, the shadows lengthening along his scruffy jaw.

"Why did you change then? Since you didn't know why I stopped you, you should've erred on the side of fangs and stayed wolfed."

"You diverted my attention at the pinnacle of instinct. A glance at you replaced one type of lust with another." He extinguished the candle. Smoke ghosted past my cheek. "When you touched my chin, I was stunned. When you spoke, I knew without a doubt I-I had to change."

"The wolf wants a bite," I said slowly. "But what about the man?"

"We're the same person." He ruffled my hair. "Difference is you'd still be human in the morning."

We were westbound on I-84 before I'd thought of anything to say. I was relieved he hadn't been about to tear my head off, but bothered by my utter helplessness. Our encounter wasn't a case of taming the beast, it was a case of the beast having other plans.

Voices buzzed through his radio receiver. Members of his team were at Calico's, stationed somewhere on my street and the road before it, watching, waiting for the sheriff's signal.

"I know you've done terrible things." I traced the dulled edge of the blade through my ruined shirt. "Unforgivable things, depending on who you ask. While I was recovering, I researched dog fighting. If what you endured was similar, I'm sorry. Raised in that horrid manner, it's not all your fault. The dog shouldn't be blamed for—"

"I'm not a dog, Marcy," his tone was clipped. "Don't pity me."

"I don't," I lied. "I'm trying to understand you. Keep your friends close and such."

"And your enemies closer? Zakar ain't the one to cozy into."

"Bothered you, didn't it?"

His grip on the wheel tightened. "Mighty peeved he pulled some creeper magic on you."

Smiling, I leaned against my headrest and watched stars twinkle over inky hills. "I'm glad I didn't go in alone."

He mhm'd his agreement. "You know, if you want company on the drive to your family's gravesite, I'd take that road trip."

"For the investigation?" I asked, dubious.

"I don't want to see you looking like you were with Zakar." With a

sheepish grin, he laid his hand on my thigh. “Unless it’s you and me.”

Cars and motorcycles filled Calico's driveway, the overflow spilling into her front yard. Strings of lights, visible over her fence, swayed in the breeze. Somewhere distant within the orchard, fire crackled.

“Where are your people?” I asked Caelan, though the answer was obvious.

He nodded farther up the street, close to my house, where a nondescript Chevy Malibu sat with its blinker on and a GPS unit glowing on the dash.

Caelan reached for the bag containing Stephen’s pelt. “You don't have to go in, Marcy. This may not be the time to see your sister, if Mina is in fact her.”

“I've got to,” I said. The crowded estate added to my concerns that Cal had little to no idea of Mina’s plans. “If she or her baby is in trouble, I’ve gotta be there for her. Give me a minute.”

I waited for him to exit, then unwrapped the knife, wrapped it in bunch of napkins shoved into his console, and eased it into my back pocket. Hopping out, I tugged the shirt over the sight, thankful the tee wasn't form-flattering, and met the sheriff at the mailbox. The bag, the top scrunched so its contents stayed hidden, I hugged to my chest, and together we made our way to the door.

My sister may have spent a lifetime on the other side. I never had to be alone all these years. What I would've given to be able to share my secret with someone, to take away those days when I was younger, watching the other kids play with their siblings. What I wouldn’t give, for two extra decades of memories with Rhetta.

The door opened before we knocked.

“This is a Celebration of *Life*, reaper. Darken someone else’s doorstep. We’ve a permit for the bonfire,” Calico drawled, a half-filled wine glass in her left hand. She wore a cream shawl over a pale paisley dress which complemented her dark skin. Her curly hair was pulled off her neck and draped to one side over her shoulder.

When she spotted me a step behind, she moved to walk me in with a hand on my shoulder. I ducked out of her grasp so fast my elbow hit her drink.

Wine spilled across the floor as she sprang back. "What's wrong, sugar?"

I'd spent the car ride thinking of what to say. Anger won. "You bitch," I hissed, clutching the bag against my chest, tears welling.

Her mouth dropped open. "Excuse me?"

"I didn't think we were besties who buy matching necklaces or anything, but I thought we were friends," I continued.

"We are." Caelan eased around the alpha. Dark eyes narrowed, she grabbed his arm. "What'd you do to her?"

"Rhetta," I snapped, pushing past her. Strangers filled the living room and kitchen, poured out into the hall. All faces I didn't recognize, and all of them had turned to regard the commotion with an intense interest. I drew level with Caelan and stopped.

Behind us, Cal set her empty glass on the nearest table, then shut the door and leaned against it.

Aiden ran for his mother, shrieking, "Human! Human!"

"It's okay." With a loving touch, his mother stroked his hair. "She's blood, hun. Your aunt."

Her dark eyes lifted to mine; picking up her son, she walked beside me to address her pack. "This is Marcy, my little sister, the one whose house many of you have guarded these past few weeks. A long time ago, my mother adopted Marcy's sister into our pack and promised to keep an eye on Marcy here, as well. Stephen made the same promise, as have I in his stead. She's a good woman. And we love Rhetta, don't we?" Several voices raised in agreement. "Any sister of hers, is a sister of ours."

Aiden wasn't impressed, but the words calmed some of the interest in our arrival.

Cal slipped an arm in mine and Caelan's. She flipped her hair to my side and laid her head on the reaper's shoulder. "Shall we retreat upstairs for privacy? I'd suggest outside, but these days the night is filled with teeth."

"Where's Rhetta?" I peered into each face, man and woman alike, scanning the Weres. "Is she here now?"

Cal caressed my wrist. "Please, come along before the pack gets nosy."

“Aiden,” I called, breaking out of her grasp.

The boy clung to the table a few feet away, assessing me as I set the bag down. Calico and Caelan observed the scene, one inquisitive, the other composed.

“Go on.” I nudged the corner gently with my foot. “This belongs to your family.”

Tiny fingers unraveled the top and reached within. Aiden lifted a corner of plush white fur.

Cal’s hand crept over her mouth. She fell to her knees. “Stevie! Oh, God, Stevie!”

Aiden wrapped himself in the pelt.

Cal crawled for her son, pulled him onto her lap, sobbing, snuggling her damp cheek against him and the fur. As she held brother and son close, a wail raced through the pack, breaking through human vocal chords into otherworldly highs. People twitched and quaked, dropped onto all fours, shifting and howling and dragging themselves toward the alphas future, current and deceased.

“Upstairs!” Cal’s lengthening jaw split her lips as she addressed me. “Under Stephen’s bed.”

We hit the bedroom as howls rose into the night. Caelan locked the door, though I was certain we didn’t need it. A multitude of albums sat dusty beneath the bed. Most were dated by years; but one was labeled, ‘Pack Adoptions.’ I sprawled on the floor, flipping through generations of parents and children and the occasional turned adult.

It took about twenty pages before I reached a young Stephen.

Then there her name was, in delicate calligraphy beneath a photograph dated the year I lost my family. I traced the names beside it: Stephen. Calico. *Rhetta*.

Except it wasn’t Rhetta, not how I knew her. Moonbeam pale skin, blue eyes, brown hair growing out silver at its roots. The girl sat on the back of a truck at Rose’s Berry Farm, settled between older kids, a bag of blueberries in her lap. My fingers trembled over her smiling face. Grandma had taken me there picking, too. How close had we come all these years?

I flung the album across the floor and slouched against the bedframe. The sheriff sank beside me.

“I looked straight into her eyes, Caelan,” I said, rubbing mine. “What kind of shitty person doesn’t recognize her own sister?”

“It ain’t your fault.” He took my hand. “Your grandmother convinced you she died.”

“I should have known.”

“You and your sister are pieces in whatever game your grandmother was playing, Marcy. You can’t be expected to know the rules when you weren’t aware you were on the board.”

“Ronan thought the shaman brought her back to life. Maybe whatever magic he called on changed her. Zakar, or whatever’s pulling his strings, called my blood special; I’d imagine Rhetta’s is even more so. And he’s been monitoring at least her nine months. ...What if he’s after her baby?”

“He’s after a bride,” the sheriff said. “Between the women whose hearts he ate and his creeping on you, he’s made that clear, but I think he might could be curious about that baby.”

I whipped open the bedroom door. The volume of the werewolves’ cries rattled the paintings. “Calico!” I shouted into the mournful din. Caelan pulled me back inside before I could reach the stairs.

“I’ll get her,” he promised. “Wait here.”

I returned to the floor, moved onto a new album with new years, watched my sister age into the woman she was today. There she was with a prom date, old boyfriends, dear friends, exploring and adventuring in ways I’d only imagined she would have, if she’d lived.

And there she stood, a bridesmaid in Evita and Stephen’s wedding. I flipped through the pictures with tentative wonder and delight, as if the album were part of a dream and the slightest slip of thought would wake me into a dark, sisterless reality. Another page and she was dancing with Jazeel, Cal, and a man I could only assume was Cal’s husband at the time.

Anger struck at the thought of my grandmother keeping us apart, of Rhetta *knowing* and never reaching out.

I turned the page to a full view of the wedding party.

A younger Caelan stood beside Stephen as best man.

“He was my best friend.” Arms crossed, Caelan leaned against the door frame. He seemed uncomfortable, fixing on the carpet between us. “He saved my skin when I first got out. When he went missing, I made it my top priority to save his. I’m so sorry I couldn’t return the favor. Still don’t know where he went or was before running into you that evening.”

I stood and moved beside him. “Did you know about Rhetta, about me?”

He tipped my chin toward his face as though to ensure I understood the truth in his eyes. “No,” he said.

A dappled hand knocked his warmth away.

“The reaper isn’t family. It isn’t his secret to bear.” Based on the condition of her outfit and the thin rivulets of blood drying down her throat, Calico managed to halt her transformation, but she’d been mobbed by werewolves who hadn’t. “You shouldn’t even be here,” she hissed, pushing his chest. “Stephen is dead because of you!”

Caelan took a quiet step back. “His beliefs were his own,” the sheriff said. “I think he died protecting Miss Davins.”

“Don’t pin this on her! You’re the one who filled his head up with fanciful ideas about humans, and love and acceptance and pulling back the curtain. He disappeared helping your cause.”

“He never arrived at the vote,” Caelan replied, rolling up his sleeves. “You knew which way he was leaning. You knew the decision was tight.”

Cal drew in a sharp breath. Bones shifted beneath her rosy cheeks. “You wouldn’t *dare* accuse me!”

I wedged between them only to get flung aside by the alpha.

“Stay back, sugar. I’m done playing nice.”

“Cal!” I pleaded, grabbing her arm.

She shook me off.

“I don’t believe it was you that did it, Calico.” Caelan glanced into the hall. “But if you don’t want to lose another member of your pack to the man that did, I suggest you listen to your sister.”

She whirled on me.

“Did you know Rhetta and Jaz kidnapped a man tonight?”

She stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“Caelan was interviewing a shaman on suspicion of working for Ingram Hayes, or, worse, hosting the monster that’s whispering in the necromancer’s ear. She wolfed out and grabbed him mid-interview. We think he’s the shaman who helped with her pregnancy.”

“How did you know about that?”

“We think he’s interested in her and the baby,” I continued. “He’s going to rip out her heart for some type of ritual.”

Before I could move, Calico was halfway down the stairs, screaming for Jazeel. “She’s in the orchard! She said she was feeling overwhelmed and needed some alone time!” At the last word she clutched the banister,

struggling to stay upright as her heels popped off and fur shredded through her calves.

chapter 25

THE BODIES

Wolves of all shapes and sizes stood between Caelan and I and the glass slider leading into the backyard. Stephen's now-bloodied pelt passed from packmate to packmate. Their attentions never swerved toward us as we pushed through the mourning crowd. Well, I had to push. Despite strength in numbers and physical advantage, the wolves parted as if on instinct away from the sheriff.

Jazeel, the single human left in the pack after his alpha had yielded to raw howls, tended the otherwise abandoned bonfire. I suspected he'd volunteered to stand guard while his mate healed and did whatever it was she was doing with Zakar.

He'd thrown a log on the flames when we'd approached. As the flare of fresh wood died, Jaz saw us, flung wildly in our direction the next log he'd picked up, and ran for the tangled branches of the apple orchard.

Caelan got his arms around the man several yards in. The two hit the ground hard and rolled. Jaz was the bigger of the pair, but size lent the advantage for only a few blows; he clearly lacked the knowledge or aggression to fight, as in a matter of moments the sheriff held him bloody and pinned against the undergrowth.

"If I didn't have a pack of emotionally stressed werewolves at my back, I'd have dropped you. Run again and I will," Caelan warned, reaching into a pouch on his gun belt. He pulled out three sharp pins, each an inch in length, and stuck them into the back of the man's shoulder.

Jaz howled and twisted, but made no move to run.

"Silver," he explained to me as I caught up. "Standard protocol when handling Werewolf. Most of them bust through the cuffs if given the opportunity." With Jaz trapped human, Caelan cuffed him proper, then stood

and ordered Rhetta's husband to his feet.

"Where's Rhetta?" I asked, knocking leaves off Caelan's shoulders. "Rhetta, Mina, whatever you call her: she's in grave danger."

Jaz scowled. A cut over his eyebrow was already scabbed over. "Worse than what *he* did? He killed her twice over! She's pregnant!"

"That don't excuse her actions," Caelan said softly. "Is the baby alright?"

"Barely," Jaz admitted. "She felt him kicking on the drive home. He's tough like her."

"Where is she, Jaz?" I grabbed the man's hand. His skin coursed with the heat of an internal bonfire. "We won't hurt or your precious baby boy."

"We'll do what's necessary to bring our suspect into custody," Caelan corrected, removing his gun from its holster as he scanned the orchard. The woods around us buzzed with insects and the soft flutter of a bat's wings. He held his finger off the firearm's trigger, but the act proved hardly reassuring to the expectant father. "I can't promise anything. I can tell you my people are ready to intervene and that I'd prefer this proceed amicably, wouldn't you?"

Jazeel studied Caelan's face, then the distant slider beyond the flames where his pack stood distracted. He nodded at the massive shed near the orchard's boundaries. "Let me poke my head in first. She was hurt bad."

With Caelan bringing up the rear, I trailed after my sister's husband. My in-law, I realized, and all I knew about him was his name. Rhetta, the common ground between us, appeared to hate my guts. His opinion could not have been much higher, considering Caelan had just shredded his wife.

"Why'd you kidnap Zakar?" I asked.

"He's the only one who knows how to handle Rhetta's unique condition," he said. "He called us in a panic this evening, told us the King of Graves had come for him and he feared the worst."

"Rightly so," Caelan added, but as we approached the shed's double doors, he pulled me aside and in a low voice, whispered, "He wanted to be got, Marcy."

With that, the sheriff uncuffed Jaz, who slid the key into the lock and twisted.

What Calico deemed a shed was positively palatial compared to the ones our neighbors parked their lawn mowers in. The double doors were large enough to allow a werewolf the size of Caelan easy access. A slobbered rag was knotted around one of the handles.

“We change in here,” Jazeel said. “Makes cleanup safer. Wouldn't want the neighbor's kids losing a ball over the fence and sneaking over to find piles of fly-covered flesh strewn across the patio.” He pounded the door and called out for Rhetta. When she didn't answer, he pulled the handle.

On the concrete floor, a miniature camping lantern illuminated a man tied to a dining room chair. His wrists and ankles were bound with garden twine; the same of which had been used to secure his waist to the chair. A dirty cloth filled his mouth, appearing the twin of the rag on the shed door. Zakar's head turned as we entered. The bright green of his eyes had dulled.

A snarl reverberated through the shed. The pale form of a werewolf crouched, one hand on the lantern, the other on the shaman's knee, back arched and tail lashing.

Jaz stepped forward. “Rhetta?” he called, then, turning his head. “They were drinking tea and chatting when I left...Rhetta, babe, what's going on?”

The wolf's ears flicked forward. Her snout lifted, crossing into the light in a silvery flash. She made for an ugly beast, too human for the elegance of canine features to prevail, and too canine for her beautiful human features, with patchy hair around her distorted nose and jaws crowded with poorly angled teeth. The fur of her neck was stained and thick with old blood. She rose onto her hind legs, pressing one paw to her hanging belly.

Blue eyes found mine in the doorway. Her ears flattened.

In a swift motion she thrust her claws into Zakar's neck.

Caelan fired two shots. Rhetta fell to the side, taking the convulsing shaman with her. With a cry, Jazeel rushed to her, slipped in the spray of blood and inadvertently kicked the light. The lantern rocked back and forth, lengthening and shortening the agonized grimace on Zakar's face as his body stilled.

The sheriff holstered his weapon. While he didn't have to lay two fingers near the gaping wound to confirm Zakar's death, he did so anyway. Pulling on a pair of gloves, he removed the gag from the shaman's mouth and lifted Zakar's lip. Ordinary human teeth. No patch.

Rhetta moaned on the floor as her mate examined the shoulder Caelan had sank two bullets into.

A tawny she-wolf filled the shed entrance, observing us through big brown eyes. Where wolves like Caelan inspired a sense of the untamed wild, the giant she-wolf was elegance defined. A narrow muzzle, white throat and

small paws added to her lean luxury. She was a racehorse, a prize, the dog favored to take home top honors at a show. I knew, as she padded forward and rubbed her face against Rhetta's, this could be no other than Calico.

I elbowed Caelan. "The wolf in you doesn't want her?"

"I am the wolf." He reached into the deceased man's pockets. "She's ambition coiled beneath silk petals," he murmured, removing a handful of black zip ties. He glanced from them to the twine wrapped several times around the shaman's hands and legs. "She'd make me a worse man than I am."

Returning the contents, Caelan set Zakar and his chair upright and whistled to the alpha and the sister I didn't dare approach until she was human. Both heads turned. "I need the body, but you are free to purge the scene of evidence. Can't charge someone for this mess if there's no evidence for who did it."

His answer surprised me. "You won't arrest Rhetta?"

"The duty of a sheriff is to resolve matters in-house where possible. Seeing as y'all belong to the same pack, we'll keep this contained. Mrs. Finn can handle a slap on the wrist and a fine for interference. If I bring Rhetta in, August will kill her for taking down the possible host of the supposed wendigo, at which point they will learn she don't die easy and start asking questions. If I tell them not to dispose of her, I have to tell them why. And when I tell them the necromancer is after her as well, they'll have no use for you. Step a few feet further to the door now, will you? Jaz, pull your wife well back."

He set the lantern straight and turned the brightness to its maximum. All it did was increase the contrast between Zakar's skin and the blood. Suspicious, I moved against the door. Calico came beside me. Jaz attempted to take his wife the same path, but she hissed and crowded against the far corner. Unable to transform, he moved in front of her.

"August and I believe you're the target," he continued, giving the chair a shake. Zakar's head lolled to one side. "As long as we have you, we have a chance at nabbing the Second and First Heads. Soon as I inform them an alternate's in play, the Otherworld will declare your presence a failure and August will come knocking. ...C'mon, big fella, that's enough opossuming around."

Blood eked from the open gash Rhetta's claws had left.

"Alright," he said, "Make it fun." He punched Zakar.

The shaman's head snapped back. A moment later, gasping, the dead man's head rolled around with a wide smile. His once stunning emerald eyes had misted over into cloudy, opalescent greens. His eyes darted left and right, finally landing on me.

"There you are," it rasped, foamed lips shaking through a dusky chuckle. "Warms my heart, seeing you chase after me. Can't same the same for that brute, but the rose worth picking comes at the risk of thorns."

The hair from his beard fell onto his shirt with every word; the fat of his cheeks thinned and the space below his sour eyes was fast becoming hollowed. He angled his head back toward Rhetta.

"Don't fret over the loss of your doctor, my doll dearest." His hands remained bound together; he tapped one pointed, blackened nail against another in contemplative patience. "I won't allow something I've worked so hard on to spoil so quickly."

Jaz started to stand.

Caelan's voice sounded muted as he cautioned everyone to remain as they were. Beside me, Calico's hackles rose. She stomped one paw onto the concrete. I set my hand against her leg; the alpha was shaking and whale-eyed as she regarded Zakar.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

With a dry creak, Zakar's head turned. "Requesting the timely deliverance of you, my final fiancée. I confess being with you tonight has lit a fire beneath my skin. We're moving fast, I know, but I simply cannot go on without you. So, I gift you this to mark our upcoming engagement: come home of your own accord and bask in the warmth of my love, or I will burn your world to the ground."

"Where's home?"

"Way down below," he whispered, and the smile turned to the lanternlight was gaping crimson and filled with razor teeth. Raising his bound hands, he snapped at the twine. As he did, his limbs lengthened and the skin of his throat tightened; unlike a werewolf, the man did not shed skin; it simply stretched and contorted with his rising form, thinning to translucency over a tall, gaunt skeleton. Within seconds it had snapped its wrists free and slashed through the twine of its waist.

Caelan jumped on the transforming creature's back as its bony spine attempted to straighten, blood spilling through the cracks between his fingers as the wolf clawed through. "Appreciate your assistance, Mrs. Finn!" the

sheriff yelled, struggling to hold the wendigo's arms to its sides. Jaz threw his weight into the fray.

Calico shook as if emerging from a nightmare. Wide-eyed, tail tucked, she sprang for the creature, locked her jaws around its neck and wrenched its head off. The head hit the door frame and landed at my feet, screaming in a pitch that made Rhetta shriek and cover her ears.

Werewolf and headless corpse smashed the men into the concrete. Cal yelped as it wrapped her into its dead embrace, knifelike claws driving again and over into her flanks. In a panic, she whipped left and right to bite at its limbs, seemingly unaware she was crushing them.

"The head!" Caelan grunted, ducking the alpha's wild snaps as he worked to free his leg.

On the floor, Zakar's misty eyes were fixed on the scene. I grabbed it and ran for the bonfire. I'd lifted the skull to the flames, when a long tongue lashed across my fingers. "Dinner's at eight," it purred. "You're in charge of dessert."

As skin melted away from bone, the flames took on an otherworldly cast. The scuffle in the shed quieted to a dull whine. I returned to see Jaz shoulder-to-shoulder with his wife, their hands on the soft flesh and fur of her belly as she whimpered against the wall. Calico was down on her side, growling heavily at the sheriff, who had his hands raised and was trying to explain he just wanted to look over her injuries.

"What the hell was that?" Jaz panted. Sweat streaked his face alongside a darker substance that must have poured from the creature's corrupted veins.

"A wendigo, I think," I said, edging nearer Zakar's remains. I'd seen a few bodies now, and experienced my fair share of gore, but the violence made my skin crawl. Absent the head, having been destroyed mid-transformation, Zakar's body was still in the state of change, but it was clear to see that, whatever its final form, the lean muscle and blade-like claws were designed for the speedy, efficient annihilation of its prey.

"You talked to it like you understood," Jaz said.

"You didn't?"

He shook his head. "Not a world off its wretched tongue. It wasn't English, wasn't any language I recognized."

"I heard every word," Rhetta whispered. A tiny paw pressed outward from within her belly. She winced. "He's going to take my baby."

“We’ve gotta get you out of here,” I said, not quite able to look at her. “Tonight. As far away as possible until this gets resolved. You saw what happened in Avon. For all we know, that was a test.”

“So were the women my team uncovered on Ingram’s trip northeast,” Caelan said, touching my shoulder. “He may be interested in Rhetta and her baby, but he aims to take you for his bride. Seems to me Ingram’s been prepping for the ceremony, and he might could just be ready.”

Standing on wobbling legs, Calico nipped the sheriff’s hand on her way past and sauntered out into the open air. He cursed and flipped her the bird.

I turned to my partner. “I’ve got to make a call.”

His eyes, human and concerned, were fixed on the wendigo’s corpse. “You shouldn’t go alone.”

“I’ll be by the fire with my pack,” I assured him.

I could’ve made the call right there, but needed air. I craved brightness and warmth and the mesmeric sway of flame. The pleasant crackle of the fire was as comforting as it was impersonal. Sparks danced into the night sky.

Wolves crept through the glass door one by one, monochrome shadows headed toward the shed. Several eyes flashed as they passed.

Sitting on the grass with my arms around my knees, I watched them. When the fire’s heat melted the lingering icy touch around my soul, I found the strength to call the number.

“You’ve got Ronan.”

A wolf the size of a husky, lanky with grey fur and Mila’s sad eyes, padded beside me and sat. Hesitantly, I stroked her neck. “What kind of work did Gram do for the shaman who saved me?”

“Hunting.”

I rubbed Mila’s ear. The pup leaned into the touch with a contented grumble. “What did she do with the bodies?”

chapter 26

STEPHEN

Ronan took a while to answer my question, but from the sudden sound of chatter to a distant roadway's rumble, I figured he'd excused himself from whatever bar or dive he was in to gain focus or privacy.

"All corpses were to be delivered to a storage unit. More intact, better paid. He sold parts for rituals and retail, so, say, an intact vamp's fang was worth a good deal more than one broken off during the fight. Gen had more finesse than I did." He laughed. "And about a hundred less scars. She sure was something, wasn't she?"

Even though my grandmother had kept secrets and done things I wasn't proud of, she was still my grandmother. Part of me loved hearing about her younger years, however dark. Mila and I warmed our toes beside the glowing flame as I listened. "Did you ever witness the shaman performing rituals?"

"Yours alone. Feathers, ash and chants brought distant thunder. Don't see how it worked, but here you are a grown woman."

A pair of Caelan's deputies walked past the fire. It was good Calico had tall fences and the nearest neighbor didn't have an upstairs window facing her backyard.

"What's his address?" I asked.

"You know," Ronan said in a tired tone. "The reason I first called was to see you skip town. I can't let send you into the lion's den. Gen would rise from her grave."

"I've no choice." I glanced at the pup beside me, then off in the direction of my house. "I have family."

"Go on up north and see what this world did to your family before you go destroying whatever you've built."

I watched Caelan consult with one of the newcomers and a recently-turned-human werewolf. "I'm allied with two sheriffs," I told Ronan. "I can put them on your trail."

"They'll find the name I gave you," he snapped. "I'm not a fool, Rhetta. Neither are you. Pay respects to your parents."

"Twenty minutes ago I watched a werewolf decapitate man." I touched the dried blood sprayed across my second shirt of the night. "I don't need to see my parents to understand what happened to them. I know I'm in deep, but until a shark drags me down, I'm staying alive. A lifeline, however small or unnecessary you may believe that information is, will help me stay afloat."

"Might be a gator."

"Hmm?"

"Oil and swamp water runs through your shaman's veins. Came from the old south, where the noon air's so thick you can cut it with a knife, where the gators are invisible a foot from shore. Last I heard he'd moved back there after the death of a voodoo queen, wiped out his enemies and became the Second Head, a high priest of L'enfer Requins. You ever heard them? I got some info I can send ya."

"Yes, but send away," I said.

Ingram Hayes had to be the shaman in question, but if he'd been the man who saved Rhetta's life, how *old* was he? He looked young in every picture Caelan had provided.

"If he's come back this way, I can't figure why except for your grandma."

I straightened. "What do you mean?"

"Bringing a person back from the brink comes at a steep price. In Gen's case, she didn't have the money or power to give the shaman anything but herself. After you were pulled from the ashes, a right grimdark phoenix you were, she fell forever in his debt. Collecting monsters, doing the jobs no one else could handle. She quit when time caught her, but left years unpaid. I'm thinking he wants a new servant to pick up where she left off."

"How'd you figure out he was back?"

"I may not hunt these days, but I've got feelers in the community. There's been activity at his old place. Sightings, sounds, lights where they ought not to be." He stopped for a truck to roar past. Near a freeway? I wondered. "Tell you what, I can call a buddy of mine and he'll help you."

“You can help me by turning over his address.”

“I don't have the exact location. Somewhere out in the North Country.”

“Tell me, please.”

“Going there might be the last thing you do, Rhetta.”

He hung up.

Covering Mila's ears, I swore.

“A word, Marcy?” Rubbing his shoulder where Caelan had freshly removed the silver, he reclined beside Mila and me. “I'm very sorry about tonight. You've gotta understand, I didn't know she was gonna do that. I didn't know she was capable of just...” he trailed off.

“Why?” I asked, looking at him.

The white wolf, blue eyes somber, sat on her haunches just behind her mate, hanging her head on his shoulder. He reached back to scratch her squared chin.

“He said he was taking the baby,” Jaz said. “He's never, in the entire time we've known him, said or done anything remotely nasty. Always been kind to us, as he should be, for the money we paid.”

“I know his shop was in Nokhurst Crossing, but did he ever mention any other locations, maybe in upstate New York?”

“No,” Jaz said. Mina nudged his arm. He turned to regard her. “Mina says yes,” he said, shrugging. “Take her word, not mine. She was the one going for shots. Zakar would inject her every three weeks to ‘bring her dead womb to life.’”

“Why isn't she human?” I asked.

“Baby's turning,” Jaz said. “She needs to let him calm. Change is risky; regular weremoms don't even attempt it. I hate when she does it, ‘specially now.’”

Mina huffed.

“Got a paper and pen?” her husband asked. “She can write. Not well, but better than me with these hands.”

“Caelan does.” I said, standing. “I'll find him.”

Rhetta's lip curled.

“I'll steal the grocery list,” Jaz said. “You girls stay here.”

Watching a werewolf write was amazing; that it was my sister, whatever she thought of me, was even more so. In shaky handwriting, she'd scrawled ‘Ozryn Zoo’ and something Jaz claimed read, ‘St. Lawrence.’

While the others sorted out Zakar's body, I slipped over to my house to change into fresh clothes, snuggle Samson and Igor, and research.

An hour after I got back, Stephen's widow, Evita, lay curled in a tight ball on the plastic-covered couch, his pelt draped over her slight frame. Pack members I didn't know mopped the floors and vacuumed the fur off the furniture. A couple of Caelan's crew were helping the situation in the dining room and hall. They'd already gotten Zakar's body photographed and removed.

I observed the process from a barstool pushed against the kitchen island—the most cleanish place downstairs—with a bottle of bourbon and an empty shot glass I'd brought from home.

Under fear of another Avon disaster, Calico had cleared all but the essential pack members from the residence. Somewhere upstairs, Mila argued with Aiden over who had to take a bath first, while Cal's strained voice tried in vain to convince them big wolves showered off their shifts.

As the scene calmed, Caelan slid into the barstool beside mine. "You trust Ronan or Rhetta's information?" he asked after I'd filled him in on my conversation with Ronan.

"Ozryn Zoo and Wildlife Reserve was a real place. Closed in 2005 and never reopened. Far as I can tell, there's a camp site and the usual spread of cozy Adirondack inns. Nothing magical, but—" I pressed my phone's screen to show him my discoveries. "There are articles about hikers encountering wolves and big cats nearby. Rumors of escaped zoo beasts and whatnot."

"Sounds reasonable for Otherworld activity. I'll see if it lines up with Tolbert's logs and the current sheriff's." He filled my glass. "You prepared to waltz into an undead empire?"

"I'm being played with and I'm not sure how or why, but I need answers. I can't live like this for long." I downed the shot and poured one for the sheriff. When he reached for it, I put my hand on his. "I'm sorry about Stephen."

"This pack and you are echoes of him. I couldn't help him; I'm

worried I won't be able to help you."

My knees bumped against Caelan's as I turned into him and propped my elbow on the counter. "How'd you walk out of bloodlust and brainwashing to be what you are?"

"He's as reckless with lives as the rest, sugar." Calico whisked into the kitchen in a damp silk bathrobe. She made her way to a cabinet for a wine glass. "How are you doing right by the man you got killed? By shooting his sister? Putting his packmates in danger? You've led us to the slaughter."

"I'm not going to fight you, Ms. Finn," Caelan said. "Your son is too young to lead in these trying times."

The woman's lips drew thin. She reached across the granite to touch my arm. "He doesn't care about any of us. He'll put you in danger and get you injured or killed and it's not going to matter because at the end of the day, he's only ever cared about taking down his prey with whatever means necessary."

Caelan crossed his arms. "That ain't true."

"No?" she hissed, hand on her hip. "He recruited my brother at a motorcycle convention, fed him all this bullshit about the benefits of the Otherworld joining the human world. People like him want to expose us to discrimination, violence and experiments. They want Aiden and Mila to live in a world where they'll be persecuted and hunted for what they are, where they'll be thrown on the first line of combat and tortured as monsters, because humans don't care if monsters die. Stephen might have died protecting you, we don't know, but he did it because his head was filled with nonsense." She uncorked a bottle as if to emphasize her point. "Pack protects pack. He didn't think of us when he acted. If he had, he'd be here today. No offense, sugar. To have my brother, I'd have sacrificed you in a heartbeat."

"I know," I said quietly.

"According to you, Marcy is a blood relation," Caelan pointed out. "Stephen protected the person who needed it at that moment. And I'll remind you that you sleep easy knowing the Otherworld loans my kind out to governments as soldiers and lab rats, and humans are dying to keep your secret."

"Fewer humans die than the number of us will." She snorted. "You think our lives are gonna change for the better? People don't care. Humans already make movies about us, write stories, parade about in costumes on Halloween. They'll be screaming to chain us to every dangerous job on the

planet and sentence the monsters to war instead of their sons and daughters.”

Calico's hand constricted my wrist. I pulled free. “How did you and Stephen get along so well?”

Her pretty eyes narrowed. “He was my brother. He knew where I stood.” She flipped her hand at Caelan. “I might engage a spot of sabotage, but I would never hurt him, even if I disagreed with his philosophy. He never agreed with how I worked, but he ate the bread and bacon I put on the table.”

“So why do you insist Caelan's to blame?” I asked.

“Before he disappeared, Stephen was headed out to a vote. The sheriff here was the last person to make contact with my brother, until you.”

“Except he failed to show.”

“Sure he did.”

A feminine cough broke through the tense kitchen. Rhetta stood in the doorway, rolling a small luggage bag. Exhaustion ate at my sister's posture, slumping her shoulders, discoloring her already shadowed blue eyes. She'd gone makeup free, damp silver hair pulled into a bun.

Joy pumped through my heart at the sight of her. When I was younger, and still kept faith, I had prayed time and again for the chance to hug my sister one more time, and now she stood before me, not as a werewolf, but as my flesh and blood human sister, and the emotions overwhelmed. Sobbing, I flung myself off the barstool to hug her. “Rhetta!”

To speak her name aloud, in public, that alone was happiness.

She lifted an ashen hand before I could wrap my arms around her. “Don't. And it's Mina to you.”

Feeling sheepish, I clasped my hands together and retreated a step. “Oh, sorry.”

“Whatever. I was told to stop by before we took off.” Wheeling her bag, she strode over to my vacated barstool and pulled it out further to accommodate her baby bump. Her blue eyes were hard and unforgiving as she glanced from Calico to Caelan. “Clear out. This is between me and her.”

“You're having a night, hun.” Calico kept her voice level and steady as she braced her arms on the counter. “We staying for you both.”

“I'm not going to kill her.” Rhetta—no, Mina—raised an eyebrow and poured herself a shot. “She's wedged between a necromancer and the King of Graves. Good going, Marcy.”

I edged between Caelan and her and set my hand over the glass. “You're pregnant.”

She flung my hand aside and downed the shot. “Who cares? I’ll kill him before I let a wendigo get my baby.”

She reached for the bottle. I snatched it away and let her glower. “Zakar, the wendigo, whatever he is, I won’t let him get either of you. I swear it, Rhetta.”

“You got laid up a week from a scratch!” She smacked the counter. “I’ve swallowed poison, cut off my arm, been hit and bitten and beat and buckshot more times than a crash test dummy. Haven’t died yet. And you have the gall to believe you can protect our baby better than I can, better than Jaz?”

“Of course not.” I glanced at the navy suitcase. “I’m a good distraction, the best chance you’ve got to jet off to Europe or Argentina or anywhere safer than Pippin Lane right now.” Without taking my eyes off Rhetta, I reached back and took Caelan’s hand. “You saved my life once, Rhetta. I don’t care if you hate my guts. These guts are going to protect you the best I can. Even if I fail, just remember that, alright? I tried. That counts for something.”

Rhetta was quiet.

“Before you walk out that door, answer me this: what happened to you that night at the cabin that made you turn out like this?”

Mina rolled her shoulders back, chin held high. “The only thing I remember from that night is you letting go of my hand.”

“Rhetta, I didn’t!” I gasped. “I couldn’t hold on, Rhetta.”

She turned her head. “You let me go.”

“Rhetta, please—”

“The hair grew in over time.” She adjusted her bun. “Nothing was different with my eyes until my first shift, and didn’t know I couldn’t die until I got flattened by an eighteen-wheeler one night while I was being a rebellious teenager and hunting apart from the pack.”

Looking anxious, Jaz poked his head around the hall. “Hey, we’ve gotta leave if we want to make it to Bradley in time.”

“It’s a temporary stop in Dallas,” Mina explained. “We’ll figure a place out once we’ve put on distance, but it won’t be enough. It’ll never be enough.”

At that point, the room was a blur. Wiping my eyes, I asked, “Did Gram ever mention a Ronan Delevant?”

The question appeared to catch her off guard. “Yeah, he watched over

me while Grandma Davins drove around with you. They hunted together. Talon was off-limits, but I knew what they did. Alphonse and Lacey—”

“My parents, Lord rest their souls,” Cal added.

“—They knew, too. Grandma Davins took me once on a trip to the morgue to see the bodies of some of the monsters she’d slain. She wanted me to know being a beast didn't mean I had to be beastly, or someone like her, or Ronan or a reaper himself would come. Fat lot of good that did me. A wendigo wants to eat my baby.” She tapped her nails on the counter, eyes fixed on the front door. “Are we done? I've got a flight to catch.”

Closing my eyes, I sighed. “Guess so.”

“Great.” She pushed off the stool and elbowed Caelan in the back on her way past. The sheriff took it in stride better than I would've. Without looking back, she whipped open the front door. “See you around.”

Calico was a warm voice in my ear urging me to sit. She stroked my shoulder.

Shaking her touch, I ran onto the front steps. “Mina!”

Halfway to the car, her head turned. “What?”

“I’m sorry. If I'd had even the slightest inkling you were alive, I'd have—”

“But you didn’t. Have a nice life, sis.”

Jaz loaded her bag into the back of his car. Soon, they were backing down the driveway, and then my sister and husband were nothing but taillights down a dark road. I stood watching until the lights disappeared, then collapsed on the steps and cried.

A few minutes later, Calico came outside and shut the door behind her. Crickets sang in the bushes. Setting a box of tissues between us, she kicked out her legs beside mine. “I can get you on the same flight,” she whispered. “Harlowe volunteered to drop you off.”

“She doesn’t want me on the same planet, let alone plane.” My heart felt tired beneath the glow of the porch light.

The rumble in the woman's throat was sad. “She needs time, is all. Homeschooled by strangers, old enough to understand her own grandmother had abandoned her to the wolves, forced to learn new customs and rules with the threat of death hanging over her. Rhett struggled with the emotional trauma of her transformation so badly my parents were forced to corral her into keeping friends with those capable of surviving the occasional mauling. Meanwhile, she watches you enjoying the freedom of a normal girl with

family, friends and education. It's not easy to see someone live the life you wanted because you couldn't fit under a bed for the sixty seconds it took your grandmother to run down the hall and shoot your grandfather in the head. And to top it off, my mother allowed Gen to babysit so she could see Rhetta. Watching Gen go home to you watered the jealousy in her heart until it blossomed into rage."

"She never visited," I said. "If she knew, why not tell me?"

"She loved you something fierce at five; she's loved you all these years the same. Gen claimed it was for your own safety you never knew, and Rhetta obeyed."

"Oh." I swallowed hard. "Will she ever come 'round?"

"She might." Cal twisted one of her dark curls. "Don't suppose you and the reaper have a plan for killing this thing?"

Mrs. Serrano's car pulled onto the street. With the trees lining Cal's drive, it was difficult to see the houses, mine included, but we heard her garage open and close and then returned to our thoughts.

"Before he died, Zakar told us that, being a spirit, we can't kill the Wendigo, but we can contain it. There's a book back in his shop. It might be the wendigo speaking through him, but we can't be sure. Maybe Zakar was sick of hosting, maybe he knew the wendigo was going to off him."

"Or he's sent you chasing daydreams in the eleventh hour. If you go to that zoo to confront him, know my pack will not be coming. They won't die for you."

"I wouldn't ask them to."

Cal turned her face toward the silent constellations of the midnight sky. "Nothing personal, sugar. Somewhere right now, a pack of undead wolves roam beneath the starlight. I'll not have fangs tear us apart when there are sheriffs available."

"Caelan's not bad," I said. "I'd take him over the wendigo."

"He's not good, either. You could find a nice, human, hell, even a werewolf, with less baggage. Or," she grinned, "if you want to try something different, I'm available in a few short weeks."

Gathering my thoughts, I ran a hand through my hair. "Worst part of this mess is I don't even know how to talk to my best friend anymore. I felt shitty enough lying to her about my past. Now, I'm lying about the present and not sure what to say."

"I wouldn't bring the world down on her, but lead with how you feel."

She squeezed my knee. “What I’m feeling is fear that the sheriff will kill you, by accident or intentionally. He’s focused on Ingram Hayes, which means he’s not focused on you entirely. If by some miracle he doesn’t get you killed, August and the Otherworld are waiting. This is not an invitation to a hunt, where sometimes the deer gets away, sometimes the pack gets the deer. Reapers always make the kill, and August’s sole attention will be on you. You’ve returned Stephen’s pelt. Say the word and I will give you plane tickets or a little love bite.”

A high-pitched scream split the air. Goosebumps pricked my arms. Dread coiled in the pit of my stomach.

“Fox got a cat,” Calico mused. “You’re smart, keeping yours indoors.”

The animal screeched again.

“You okay, sugar?”

In a dream turned nightmare, I rose and walked across her yard, beyond the sidewalk, past the dim streetlights, toward the car owned by Caelan's deputy. The driver's side door hung open. The closer I came, the louder grew the dinging reminder of a key left in the ignition.

“Marcy!” Calico called from the middle of the street, running in her bare feet and robe.

A swipe of dark, wet crimson glistened on the front fender. A staggering trail of droplets thickened on the sidewalk.

I twisted around to yell at her. “Get Caelan! Take the kids and go!” My legs were heavy. Sweat dripped down my neck. But I moved forward, heavy step after heavy step, up my driveway.

Glass lay scattered across my darkened porch. The dining room window had been smashed.

I knew who the screams belonged to.

I knew what I was going to find.

A sheriff’s deputy swung around the side of the house as I touched my doorknob. Blood from a cut throat stained his shirt; the wound slanted his head at an awkward angle. He gripped a large, mocha tabby cat by the throat.

Samson.

His paws twitched and stilled.

chapter 27

GONE

I knew what I had to do. What I should do. But I couldn't make my body move, couldn't tear my eyes off Samson. His tail dangled limp between his legs; his eyes, those wide, loving eyes, stared empty into the starlight.

The dead man's lips twisted. "Want to see the other one?"

I felt nothing but the cool breeze. I dug my nails into the soft flesh of my palm.

I wasn't sure if I screamed charging him, but as my fist hit his bloody chin, he grabbed me by the waist and I did then. We fell into the mulch, Samson's body pressed between us, and rolled into the grass before I was able to hit it in the eye with a spade I'd forgotten to pick up in my gardening ventures and break loose.

The deputy flung the spade at me. I ducked, running around to get my wheel barrow between it and me. Bracing its hands on either side of the wheelbarrow, the deputy laughed.

Another sound caught its attention; the head whipped around at an owl's tilt.

Caelan was in the road, yelling at me to get down. Covering my ears from the gunshot I knew was coming, I made myself small.

The bullet hit the deputy in the throat, sailed straight on through and into the arborvitaes. Grinning, the deputy released the wheelbarrow and staggered at a fast run across the street.

I thought it might've been targeting Caelan, but he was near the top of the cul-de-sac, and then I saw him: Devin, standing in his driveway with a bag of fast food clutched in one hand.

"Run!" I screamed, waving my arms. "Run, Devin! Run!"

Except he didn't. Mouth open, he took a single, half-step toward the

glow of his garage.

Caelan couldn't shift without Devin seeing. He fired again as he ran, skimmed his mark, but the mindless killer rushed on, now absent a chunk of skull on the back of its head.

I tackled it from behind. Shoulders thrashing against the ground, the body struggled against my weight, tried to roll and wrap its arms around mine. In a blind rage I punched and slapped and clawed at the possessed man until my hands hurt, until the thing's face contorted into a sneer and Devin was forgotten as it grabbed me by my hair and yanked my neck toward its flat, human teeth. I locked my arms at the elbows, dug my fingers into the deputy's face and pushed against his pull.

At that instant, Caelan knocked me aside.

I caught my breath on the sidewalk as he flipped the monstrosity onto its stomach and cuffed it.

The garage across the street was closed. Three figures huddled against the pane of an upstairs window.

My gaze fell upon the slight, still figure of my cat. I started for him.

"We've gotta go." Caelan was a hot hand on my waist, hauling me backward.

"Samson—" I fought against him for every inch of grass toward my pet.

"Marcy." Bright amber eyes met mine. "He's dead."

A fact I refused to acknowledge even though I knew it, too.

"Igor may not be!" I insisted, but the sheriff's grip was unrelenting. Frustrated, I pushed at his chest. "I don't know where she is. She could be in the house, she could be hiding, she could be—"

He tugged me toward the street. "She's a cat."

"She's family!" I hissed. "I'm not leaving without her."

He cupped my cheek. "She's a cat," he repeated. "She can handle herself. We'll come back for her; I promise."

Branches shivered in my shadowed side yard. An enormous gray wolf emerged, gray, not for its fur, but rather, the lack of it. Bloat filled its hairless stomach and distorted its bulging face. A second animal broke through the brush line, this one thin with stiff muscles and taut skin, oozing a tarry liquid on one side, as if someone had shoveled roadkill from a sunbaked highway.

Laughter echoed in my ears.

We ran.

Not for my darkened house, where who knew what horrors awaited us, and not for Calico's, where she and the kids might still be escaping.

Caelan shoved me at the open driver's side door of his deputy's car and shut me inside. When I turned the key, he had jumped into the passenger seat and slammed the door, craning his neck around. "Gun it," he said.

This time, I didn't need telling twice.

The pair of wolves rushed after the car. One ranged up to the bumper, then speed was on our side. In the blood-splattered rearview mirror, beyond the charging wolves, a tall, emaciated human shape picked up Samson. I wasn't sure, but its legs appeared to end in hooves.

"Eyes ahead." Caelan squeezed my shoulder. "You've got to focus."
He was right. My life was gone.

We'd been driving five minutes toward the Bayberry Town Center before Caelan's phone rang. He switched to speaker as soon as he recognized the alpha's voice. Calico had escaped with Evita, Aiden, Mila and the remaining pack members. They were headed to a safehouse for the remainder of the night.

Caelan dropped his phone into his lap and returned to communications with his team over the car radio. His shirt from his left shoulder to his elbow was soaked in darkness. I tried not to think about the wetness seeping into the back of my shirt or the tacky pull of the steering wheel. We were sitting in a crime scene. Evidence of who killed the unfortunate deputy was likely destroyed.

Sometime between the 84 on-ramp and deciding where we were escaping to, I pulled over on a quiet stretch of road and used the deputy's wolf kit to clear the blood off the interior windshield.

I tossed the bloody undershirt into the back seat. "Will you kill Devin?"

Caelan looked confused. "Who?"

A truck roared past. The car rattled.

"My neighbor's kid. He saw—" The words stalled in my throat. I clenched the wheel tighter and pulled back onto the road. "Well, if he

survived.”

“If your neighbors call the police, it'll get forwarded to my office. I'll have to investigate and report my findings.”

“They didn't see anything.”

“Nothing inhuman,” he agreed, leaning against the headrest. “Higgins not shifting helped. Sheriffs can't kill every human who spots a couple of mangy strays running through the neighborhood.”

“Sorry about Higgins,” I said, with a somber glance at the bloodstained leather.

“Someone will be.” There existed a cheerful gloom and doom in his voice, a low undercurrent of danger, the indigo still surface of a deep river.

He didn't say another word until we'd arrived at Nokhurst Crossing in West Hartford. The streets were hushed in the predawn hour, storefronts quiet with the exception of a distant base thumping from the bar at the opposite end of the lane and two or three others scattered through the blocks.

I pulled the car in front of Zakar's door.

“Weren't your people here?” I asked the sheriff as he stepped around the hood to assess the scene.

Strips of yellow police tape wrapped around the parking meters and nearby trees, blocking off the entrance. He lifted the taut material, ducked underneath, then held it up for me to slip under. “They were, until your sister killed Zakar. We're short-staffed. What I've got is headed back to Pippin Lane to contain the current scene.”

“Even with help from August's team?” I lifted the hem of my shirt to dry. I felt guilty wearing his colleague's blood. I couldn't imagine how he felt having Higgins all over him.

“Connecticut is home to three and a half million people. A small fraction are registered werewolf, and an even smaller number work in our division. Some of our best CSIs lived in Avon. Out-of-state assistance can't make up for what we've lost. Bringing you on hasn't helped.”

He opened the door, flipping on a switch near the wall. The tented atmosphere reflected light from rigged spotlights and lamps. The acrid tang of incense and copper lingered in the air, but whatever magic had been here seemed faded and mundane.

Mindful not to disturb the scene, I did my best to follow Caela's exact path. He stopped at the section of apparel, unbuttoned his shirt and pulled off

the undershirt along with it, swapping both for a tee. He pulled another off the rack and tossed it to me. Blood stained his jeans and mine, but we lacked a convenient change of clothes in that department.

I changed tops, gathered our dirty clothes and shoved them into a plastic shopping bag marked by a jaguar's head.

"I ain't sure about this, Marcy." He popped a cabinet door full of voodoo dolls, grimaced, and closed it. "The nastiest creatures I've encountered have never respected a book's word as law."

"You're the one telling me a lot of the old grimoires and manuscripts referenced by true dark magic users aren't available online. I assume because the contents are effective and the Otherworld would send a sheriff to silence them if they uploaded the documents. You don't go around correcting human misconceptions about silver, right? Isn't this the same idea?"

We moved into the hallway. Cool, damp air touched our skin as we passed through the striped fabric. Caelan flipped another switch. A light flicked on near the back door. Within the gloom, the hall's light caught a reflective shine in Caelan's eyes. An orange extension cord snaked across the floor. A second cable split halfway down the hall, coiled into what amounted to a small office.

The light in this room was small and dim. Red velvet wallpaper lined the interior, adding a soft shine. A small circle of runes and symbols had been etched in the center of the hardwood floor. At its center was a tentacled heart. Obscuring one side of the circle was a velvet beanbag, big enough to act as a werewolf-sized dog bed or a lounger for two regular people. Beside it stood a bookcase, upon which were several ornately carved boxes.

Across from it, a small fridge sat unplugged. I moved closer, curious.

"Emptied earlier," Caelan said, noticing my gaze. "He helped clients with fertility, magical diseases, and a number of issues related to intimacy. Give me a hand with the beanbag. Jali says there's a switch behind it to move the bookcase."

We dragged the beanbag out of the way. Caelan activated the switch, a false wall plate near the floor, and the bookcase creaked open.

This room lacked the adornments of the first. It was no larger than my walk-in closet, with a small desk, a cigar tray, and a stack of books. Above the desk, a hatch and folded ladder was marked 'for roof access only.' The rest of the room was inventory, broken and new, stacked in cardboard boxes.

The books were written in Latin, others German and French, and a

few thin volumes I couldn't comprehend. None of them appeared resembled the dark grimoire of my imagination. There was no human skin binding, no rusted locks or jeweled covers or hefty tomes of knowledge. They were simple and stress-worn by many hands and turned pages.

We divided the titles between us, about six each, and set to flipping. We sat on the floor of the first (and better lit) room to read. Neither one of us had wanted to sit on the beanbag, even in our filthy states.

Despite their ordinary exterior, the pages within the bindings were hand written. Drawings of ghastly creatures and sizzling potions filled the margins. How-to recipes with a chef's edits, I thought, touching a diagram of a young lamb's throat. Caelan thumbed through a smaller volume that had a corner bent on a page depicting a small cloth bag and several herbs under the title 'gris-gris.'

It looked awfully similar to what Gram had been stuffing in our nightstands at the end.

"Thought there'd be more of a mystic element," I said. "These are instructions. Do these things in the right order and presto! You've shoved a demon inside of a dead crow."

The sheriff closed his book. "My Latin, or any other language, ain't sterling," he said. "Even if we were to find an illustrated binding spell, could you translate it?"

I shook my head. "High school Spanish was the extent of my language skills. My parents were fluent in German and Greek, so they taught Rhetta and I, but after the attack, Gram never carried on. I've forgotten everything."

He pulled out his phone. I could see from the screen he'd missed several calls. "What if we find a few key words?"

"That could work."

After listening to a voicemail, he set his book on the stack of skimmed prose and stood. "We'll have to take this on the road, Marcy."

"Reading too much makes me car sick, so as long as I drive, that's fine by me." I dropped my book onto his and accepted his offered hand. "What's the matter?"

"The orchard's overrun with the dead. Entire neighborhood has been evacuated." He fumbled on the words. "No sign of Igor, but Jali located Samson limping around the back deck. Had a note nailed onto his back saying, 'Family of all shapes and sizes is welcome to dinner.' ...He's not

alive,” Caelan added, setting a hand on my shoulder. It didn't make me feel any less disturbed.

A shrill car alarm echoed in the hall, a faint ringing in my ears, followed by a metallic crunch and a howl that drowned out the wailing alarm. Caelan moved into the hallway, listening.

Claws scratched against the front door to the shop. The rear door was quiet, but for how long?

Quickly, I dumped the clothes out of the shopping bag and filled it with the books instead.

“We’re going out the roof,” Caelan said.

He had to push the desk out into the first room to let the ladder drop from overhead. A galvanized hatch opened into the night air. Once I'd scrambled up with my precious cargo, he shut the door and followed me.

Screams rang through the open air. I ran to the street-facing side of the roof. Patrons staggered from the bar in fog of hazy neon. The last one out, a woman in glittering bronze dress, was over taken in seconds as a massive werewolf on two legs burst through the doors behind her. It pinned her to the ground and tore her arm off at the shoulder.

Directly below me, the deputy's car was totaled. Even the alarm had stopped.

“They're inside.” Caelan came beside me. “There are more out back.”

chapter 28

DEAD WIND

The sheriff leaned over the side and peered at the empty storefront. Broken tape fluttered on the breeze. Bloody prints and sagging strips of flesh clung to the totaled car. The screams were constant now, pleas for help echoing through the manicured shopping district. People were running in all directions, stalked by shadows, whether on two legs or four, that were always, hopelessly, faster.

Behind us, claws raked against the brick wall. My pulse quickened. Had they determined we were on the roof and were trying to scale the wall? I'd seen Rhetta's sloppy penmanship. It was easy to imagine a werewolf of her dexterity figuring out the hatch; perhaps it couldn't fit through, but the human dead certainly could.

"I need to be down there," Caelan said. "You're gonna have to come."

I jerked away from the edge at the mere thought of jumping onto concrete. Heights weren't my favorite thing in the world; the glass panels in the mall made my stomach flip when I approached the edge too quickly.

The sheriff raised his eyebrows. "It ain't a skyscraper."

"For a werewolf. My bones don't heal like yours."

He turned toward the distant shrieks. "Imagine a tall ladder. I'll lower you over. Won't be more than ten or fifteen feet."

"People get hurt on lesser falls. I promise you, I'm snapping an ankle."

He paced along the edge. "Alright, alright," he decided, rubbing his forehead. The skin around his eye bunched and peeled. "Where's your car?"

"My car?"

"You left it here when I drove you to Ms. Finn's. Where is it?"

"Few blocks down in the garage."

Nokhurst Crossing had been built on a hill, not a huge hill, but around Christmas every year between the snow and presents, the slope felt noticeable. The parking garage lay at the base and across a busy intersection. We couldn't see that far from Zakar's shop, but the occasional blaring horn didn't escape our notice.

Caelan unbuttoned his shirt then tossed me the contents of his pockets. His phone was my primary concern. I placed that and his wallet into the book bag. Below us, a wolf thrust its snout into a broken window, sniffed, and proceeded through the shop's door.

Caelan removed his shoes, chucking one at the treeline at the rear of the building. A few of the snarls quieted. He threw the second. When it hit the brush, we heard three three or four of the wolves race after the sound.

"Still have the keys?"

I plucked the hem of my t-shirt. "This is my third change of clothes tonight. No, I don't have the keys. They're back on the counter where I'd thrown them after checking on, on..."

"Samson and Igor," he said.

"Yeah," I said, red-eyed. I couldn't afford to get emotional, but the levy was threatening to break all over again at the thought of them safe in my arms just hours ago. "If I can get in the door, I can hot-wire it." It was the only car in the world I could, and while I'd made fun of Gram at the time, I was so glad for what she'd taught me.

And angry she'd never explained why.

He nodded. "Run on to your car. If you find someone else's vehicle abandoned along the way, or someone offers you a lift, use your best judgment. I'll meet you there in thirty minutes. If you get your car started, don't wait; drive somewhere safe and call my office. Ask for Jorge. He'll see you're safe." The skin beneath Caelan's palm darkened into a distorted paw pad. "We'll go down together. Hang tight, alright? Promise I won't throw you off."

The transformation took hold. When it was over, the breeze ushered away the steam and left a larger, angrier animal in the sheriff's place. The wolf lowered himself impatiently, ears back, fangs drawn. When I pointed at the bag, he lifted it in his jaw. I climbed onto the slick mass of bloody fur, clinging to his neck, and then we were on the ground crouched in glass beside the deputy's smashed car.

The wolf cocked his head as if to say 'told you so.' The car's dangling

side mirror caught the eyeshine of an approaching shadow through the streetlight.

Head low, the sheriff sprinted at the dead beast, caught his slower moving opponent by the underside of the chin and dragged it twisting to the ground. I snatched the bag and ran down the opposite end of the street, then downhill toward the garage.

I took the distance in intervals, bursts of speed interspersed with hiding places around parked cars and flipped restaurant tables. I wasn't sure how many were out there, but I knew the death toll at Avon. The necromancer had more than enough bodies to decimate Nokhurst Crossing.

Luckily the hour was late, or early, depending on the view, but there were enough people among the bars, and several of them drunk, to generate a fair amount of carnage in the streets.

People who were fast, or lucky, enough to shelter from the wrath of the undead had done so. Bleeding, hurt, alive, dying: sometimes we made eye contact from our hiding places as decaying shadows crossed between.

My heart tightened at the thought of Samson's corpse wandering the yard. Pressure built behind my eyes. Closing them, I wiped my cheek, taking several big, slow breaths. Sounds of a distant fight echoed through the shops. Laden with books, the plastic bag had left a sore line on my hand.

It was hard to ground myself when the ground I knew and loved had been swept out from underneath my feet.

The garage was abandoned at this hour. As I passed into the low-lit underground, I walked by the attendants' booth. Bars to block and allow car access had been lifted on both sides. The booth door was open but empty.

At the first corner leading deeper into the heart of the lot, a soft wheeze caught my attention. Pressed against a cold pillar, I paused to listen.

My car was a few stories higher. I needed to reach the elevator or stairs, preferably the stairs so Caelan could track me and I could observe the scene without being set upon the instant the elevator doors opened, but that meant crossing at least half of the lower level in the open.

The wheezing continued at a quicker tempo. I peeked around the corner. In the center aisle a purse lay upended.

Beyond spilled lipstick and a checkbook, a young woman crouched between a car and a jeep, halfway safe to the stairs. Her panting, panicked commentary over a cell phone filled the air. She squatted in a spreading pool of crimson, one hand on her waist, the other braced on the spare tire. Sweat

glistened on her face, accompanied by a smile when she spotted me. She snapped and pointed at the purse's strewn contents.

"My keys!"

Sinking to the ground, I lifted a hand to my lips, judging how and whether it was safe to get to her.

"Keys!" She slapped the jeep. "Mine. Let's go."

I mouthed a plea for quiet, but she continued tapping, gesturing, wheezing into her cell.

Two vehicles to her right, a bruised, distended snout rose over a car hood. White-eyed, it smiled with a gator-like satisfaction. Black rot oozed off its worming tongue, falling upon the vehicle's hood in slow, loud splats.

Placing one palm flat on the hood, it leaned in the direction of the jeep and sniffed.

Unaware, the woman eased toward the front of the jeep.

She was making a go for the keys, I realized belatedly. Crouched against the pillar, there was nothing I could do, no sound or gesture that wouldn't draw attention to myself in the process.

The pop-pop of claws punching through metal made her pause, and then her phone slipped through her sweaty hands and hit the concrete with a wet clatter.

The werewolf shot off the car hood and onto the jeep's, reaching its head and one arm through the gap between vehicles to catch her.

She screamed, threw herself on the ground, managed half her body beneath the vehicle when the werewolf's claws caught her foot. It tore her up and out from beneath the vehicle, sinking its fangs into the flesh of her thigh. Blood ran down her belly and neck as she beat at it, helpless.

With its prey as good as immobilized, it let her drop. Her head hit the ground at a terrible angle and she went quiet. It climbed off the roof of the vehicle and onto the ground to drag her into better position to feed, inadvertently kicking the cell phone, through which a person was asking, in increasing desperation, what the hell was happening.

Gutting the woman momentarily consumed the werewolf's attention. I fled into the attendant's booth and eased shut the door.

The voice over the cellphone subsided at some point, then the phone vibrated, over and over, a mirror to the anxious thump of my heart.

I couldn't stay in this cramped box, unable to defend myself if anything got through the window or door. When the world quieted and I felt the impulse to dare fate, I slipped out and retreated through the front entrance into the thin space between the garage wall and a thick screen of boxwood.

In a gust of dead wind appeared the wolf, a solitary black figure glossed in the neons of a local pizza parlor. He trotted beneath sign after sign, nose pressed tight along the ground, except for the occasional pause to track a sound or movement elsewhere on the streets. Gore adorned his maw.

I let him roam until he was within range of a soft whistle.

His head tilted when I emerged.

“Problem,” I announced.

The wolf nose me back into my hiding spot and walked inside. There was a violent series of snarls and loud crashes, then Caelan emerged to escort me.

We walked past the still-gnashing head of the werewolf. From the smear of oily blood on the ground, it appeared that Caelan had purposefully rolled the head away and into a corner, where its clouded eyes were of little use to Ingram Hayes and the wendigo.

I dragged the woman's mangled body out of the way of her jeep's tires. I said a quiet prayer for the woman, which I hadn't done in years, closed her eyes and got into the driver's seat. Wincing, doused in blood and fur, Caelan joined me. The bones under his skin slithered into place as he rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck.

“You've good instinct, for a human civilian,” he panted, once we'd driven onto the street and made it several blocks. I didn't ask him what he meant as he sagged beside me in the passenger's seat and fished his phone out of the bag. “If you had fangs, I'd get you training and have you in the field with me.”

I put his hand on the quaking muscles of my thigh. “My legs are gonna crap out on me. You don't want this in the field.”

Several police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances rushed past us as we turned onto the highway. He patted my knee and took back his hand. “Want me to drive?”

“Nah, I'm good.” Another lie. When he wasn't looking, I thumbed a tear off my cheek. “Find the binding spell. That wendigo is going back to hell

in a handbasket, or whatever it takes to bring him there.”

A few hours and an arranged car exchange later (during which one of Caelan's deputies gave him fresh clothes and we split the books with trusted members of his team), the solution came through from the final third of a Latin text on Jorge's search. He'd scanned the pages for key phrases: Spiritus. Anima. Evocatio. Nexum.

Caelan waited twenty minutes more to retrieve a translation of the instructions. While the information *seemed* accurate to him and Jorge, he asked someone with more knowledge of the dead language to confirm its meaning; the text was a match for other documents the CPA had access to and what results had been recorded were successful. However, there was not, unfortunately an expert to consult on the matter of the wendigo itself; it was a rarer spirit, and what we had seemed close, but not quite. As Caelan explained, similar monsters have always existed across continents and time; it was possible our prey was some type of southern variant.

“What's Jorge say?” I asked when his phone dinged again. Headlights illuminated the New York border.

“Good news, bad news: it's simple, but, doesn't specify wendigo, so even if Zakar was speaking as himself for one unadulterated minute, it might could prove as effective as spritzing a werewolf with your plant mister. ‘Course, I can't kill a spirit, so our alternate plan, and what the Otherworld tasked me with doing, is playing whack-a-mole with the hosts. With Zakar off the board, the First Head has likely taken up residence with Ingram Hayes; he's the one who's been practicing on those poor women. Taking down the Second Head should quell the undead activity for another year or so while the First Head seeks a suitable replacement. You'd have a about year before he comes for you again,” he said, stroking his chin. “Wonder if it's possible to convince the Otherworld to keep you in my department that long, seeing as you're a target of the First Head. If we catch him, Stephen's murder is pinned on Ingram Hayes, the investigation is considered closed even though we're missing information, and after what's happened on Pippin Lane and Nokhurst Crossing, you'll be killed in a matter of days.”

“Lose, lose,” I mumbled. “What’s the containment looking like?”

“We’re creating a cursed necklace, transferring the spirit from the host to an object. True dark magic would be fixin’ to then use the locket for nefarious purposes, but we’ll lock it away in a secure location, provided of course this works.”

“How do we do it?”

He squinted at the screen in the darkness. “A mixture of your blood and the host’s blood, while it’s infected with the spirit, is to coat a black sapphire. There’s words to be said over it, but my pronunciation mangles them.”

“Why’s it require my blood?” I asked.

“Or mine,” Caelan said. “According to the text, this allows control over the entity when you then wear the necklace, locket, ring, whatever you embed the stone into. Probably a release mechanism to keep the spirit from digging into the wearer’s body, allowing you the ability to take the blasted thing off when you’ve finished your ill deeds.” He shrugged. “We could try without that element, but you might be boiling spaghetti without the water.”

“Where do we find a black sapphire?”

“Jeweler, specialty store? I’ll have Jali pick it up on her way. She recommends a necklace with a sturdy chain; if someone falls, it’d be easier for another to carry on; I’m inclined to agree.”

I nodded, and the realization hit me that Jali was very well referring to the least durable member of Caelan’s team. “I can’t sit this one out, can I?”

“You’re our best shot at capture. If you aren’t there, I’m certain the First and Second Heads will skip town in favor of hunting you and your sister down.” He paused. “Thing is, Marcy, whatever happens to the rest of us, the southern wendigo, demon, spirit, whatever it is: it’s got a plan for you. You’ll be able to close the distance with its host in a way none of us can, be it Ingram Hayes or someone new. And I can’t kill it, much as I might want to.” He looked particularly frustrated at the thought. “I can make its host bleed, whoever it shakes out to be, but you might be the only one left standing to finish the job.”

The sun blushed peach through swaths of cirrus clouds when we pulled into a motel off the New York interstate, about an hour south of our final destination: the Ozryn Zoo and Wildlife Reserve. While I preferred encountering the wendigo in the daylight, and argued against Caelan on that point, he was right about rest.

“We'll be safe here,” he said as truck engine cooled. “We'll meet the rest outside the zoo.”

“I'd prefer daylight.”

“Afraid you're in the minority.” He propped open the door and ushered me through. “The CPA won't compromise for a human's comfort.”

A balding man in a Knicks jersey looked up from his computer. “Dates?”

Caelan frowned at a hanging clock in the shape of a black cat. Glancing at me with a worried expression, he moved as if to block it from my sightline, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and turning me slightly away. “Reckon a checkout of eight pm tonight would do just fine for us.”

I hoped my exhaustion wasn't showing as I mustered a perky, “Separate rooms, please. He snores.”

Caelan paid cash up front. The man handed us a pair of keys, and we headed out to find the rooms. Numbered eight and eleven, we were separated by a couple doors. Wasn't a concern of mine as I wished him good morning and picked the far room.

He bid me the same in a doubtful tone. I felt his gaze on my back as I unlocked the door and stepped inside.

The room may have been last renovated in the seventies. A musty basement odor lingered near the dresser where I'd dumped my bag. Boxy television. Bright, faded wallpaper decorated with dusty brown geese.

Sticky light switches. Ugh.

I locked the door, sat on the creaky bed, like I'd sat on the motel bed waiting for Gram so many years ago, and let the weight of the past twenty-four hours sink in.

I was so glad to have left Lisa and Wyatt out of this, but with Igor and Samson's deaths, the life of Marcy Davins was over. Or it would be, in a few hours, when we confronted this thing. Not a thing. A southern wendigo and its necromancer.

It'd taken everything from me. Everything, down to my dreams real and imagined.

Rhetta, I comforted myself with the fact that I had gone this long without her, and all I had wanted was my sister alive, and she *was*, and I should count that for the blessing it was. As long as she was alive, there was hope.

Igor, they hadn't found, but Samson had showed up with a note; what

if she was being kept as the next message?

Samson: the last tie to my true self, to the frightened girl beneath the bed. He'd protected me when I couldn't and he'd stayed with me through every trial after. I had failed him so terribly, and now he was gone, or worse.

There was a knock on the door.

I wiped my face on my shirt and forced myself to greet Caelan. He stood with a bottled water from the vending machine and two bags of pretzels. His dark hair was wet and stuck up at odd angles. Showered, as I should've done.

"Didn't want to get you anything caffeinated," he said. "Sleeping in the daylight's tough."

Accepting his offerings, I waved him in, but held the water near the bedside lamp and gave it a swirl. "Didn't add any sleep aids, did you?"

"Cross my black, little heart." He pointed at the bed. "May I?"

I nodded and took a sip. There wasn't any other furniture in the room for him to sit, unless he wanted to take the TV off the dresser, and I wasn't mean enough make him sit on stained carpeting.

"You're living in the Ritz here; mice are playing marbles above my bed," he said, kicking off his shoes. "And I only snore when I'm sick, so you know."

"Werewolves get colds?"

"We aren't immune, but we run through it quicker." Laying back on my pillows, arms behind his head, he watched me. "Point is, I would've been fine with one room, and under other circumstances, you would've been fine with such an arrangement, too."

I popped the bag and fished for a pretzel even though I wasn't hungry; I didn't want to see the concern in his eyes and relive the past hours. I was done, absolutely done, with today.

"I'm not here to comfort you, Marcy."

Weary curiosity turned my head. "So why are you in my room?"

"I've spent enough of my life alone to know I don't want it to end that way." He stood, opening his arms. "C'mere."

I hugged him. His hair carried a faint metallic scent of blood, but he was warm and a friend and I needed one of those more than I'd realized.

My thoughts were vultures, preying on the present. The second I felt happy, the moment I dropped my guard, worries and doubts tore it apart. When the first tear streaked his shirt, I pulled away and rolled onto the bed

where I could hide my face.

"I'll be fine," I said as he laid beside me. I thought he might touch me, wanted his comfort, but he left me alone to take up residence against the pillows.

"You don't have to be," he replied in a soft voice. "It's not fine what happened to you. It's not going to be fine for a while."

I turned his direction, frowning. "Maybe never."

"Maybe," he agreed, pensive as he regarded the room's decor. He rolled against me, laying his hand on my arm. When I didn't move, he let it fall heavier. His bright eyes were inches from mine. "Animals have healing effects on people. I could be a wolf, let you stroke my fluffy tail."

The thought made me crack a smile. "You aren't fluffy."

"No, Ma'am, but you had cats who were. Why don't you tell me about Samson and Igor?"

It took a lot of breaks and tears but I told him about Samson's bravery and the patience needed to care for Igor after her rescue, how much work went into getting her to trust me, how Samson always grumbled, but I could tell he enjoyed having the younger cat around. Caelan listened, genuinely listened to every word.

The room's curtains were outlined in a dull orange glow when I woke up. The sun had changed position, leaving the room gray. Caelan, who'd fallen asleep beside me, was nowhere to be seen. At half past six I took a quick shower and turned on the news.

Blurry footage from a bar. Over it a scrolling title: *Werewolves in West Hartford? The Attack on Nokhurst Crossing*. I changed the channel. News stations worldwide aired the same footage or similar, gruesome variations. One featured a young woman with tears in her eyes, stumbling through a recount of what she'd seen. She'd thought it was a hoax, a kind of movie stunt, until a werewolf grabbed her best friend. The woman's voice trembled. She cried. Disgust welled in my stomach and I shut the TV off.

Caelan sat outside on a bench beside the room, watching the moon crest a stand of white pines. Bats skirted the lights of the parking lot.

I sat beside him. “It didn’t come down to a vote, but you got what you wanted. The Otherworld is out, at least in some capacity.”

“With technology these days, it was a matter of time,” he said. “We could’ve gotten in front of this, done things the right way, the smart way. Instead, chaos.”

“The two worlds colliding won’t be better for everyone, but I think for most it will. No more invitations. Speaking as a future hunted human, that’ll be nice.” I lifted a hand. “I know, I know, August and the Otherworld are gunning for me anyway.”

“It’ll stop a lot of killing,” he said. “Reapers won’t know what to do with themselves. There’ll be trouble.” He passed me a paper from his notepad and a small velvet box. “You better memorize the words. You won’t get but one chance.”

Inside the box rested a fine silver necklace with a dark stone fixed to a simple backing. When I held it to the setting sun, the sapphire seemed matte and dull. “You sleep any?”

“Wink or two.”

“Sleep when we’re dead, right?”

“If we’re lucky.”

Caelan helped me with the necklace, and from then on we were quiet. He drove with a hand on my knee. Resting my hand on his, I sat with the paper on my lap, mumbling the binding spell over and over as the stars took control of the sky.

My blood, their blood, these words.

The hard part wasn’t the spell: it was getting the wendigo to bleed.

As we pulled along the road near the abandoned zoo, I felt a sudden twist in my gut, a sickness in my stomach and true, genuine foreboding.

A half mile remaining, a stifling thickness pressed the oxygen from the air.

One quarter mile to go, the feeling worsened to light-headed nausea.

We arrived at the overgrown parking lot. In the distance, a partially-collapsed, log-hewn sign read, “Ozryn Zoo.”

Caelan’s officers had turned out in full along with about thirty others. The ‘Connecticut’ sheriff, whose authority over the case extended across state lines, lifted me onto the tailgate of his truck, then jumped up and introduced me to the group at large with a warning that I was not to be eaten, bitten, clawed or otherwise intimidated.

“I trust you,” he whispered, “Don't trust them. They wouldn't even permit body armor for you.”

The east coast sheriffs were all present, as was August, who had an arm around Winona. The brunette bounced on her toes, smiling up at me in wicked glee. In the crowd I also spotted Jorge, whose nervous expression broke to give me a whistle and a wave. The woman beside his lanky frame, Jali, I thought, rolled her eyes.

I stood fidgeting as the sheriff gave his orders, wondering what I should do or hold. I settled on fingering the necklace around my throat, wondering if my blood could soak the sapphire now, or if it was more an in-the-moment situation. The book hadn't explicitly said.

When he was done, Caelan had me outfitted with a belt to better carry everything I might need. My knife I made sure was tucked in a pocket. And then remained a handgun loaded with silvered bullets in my sweaty right hand, and a flashlight in the left. I turned the light onto the path ahead, bouncing off the shuttered iron gates and its metal letters labeled 'Entrance.'

A werewolf of the bipedal variety slashed the gate chain and kicked open the screaming iron. Above, something hooted. I angled the light onto the arched lettering.

A tattered owl perched on the final, dilapidated letter. Its head twisted, wringing flea-ridden feathers from its throat.

“Find it, bleed it, bind it,” Caelan said. His hand fell hot and heavy on my shoulder.

He changed beside me.

Snarls overtook quiet grunts and groans, and when the wind blew the steam of coppery change past my sneakers, a pack of werewolves waited at my back. Eyes of all colors—Caelan's and August's bright harvest moons, dimmer, greener, browner—all focused on me.

The lone human.

The hair on my arms prickled. I felt their eyes on my back, felt the pull of something dark and dead deep in my gut. My lips tasted bitter, my throat a track of ice. I made my way beneath the sign, past the creaking gate, squeezed through a rusted turnstile, and let the single beam of my flashlight illuminate the forward path.

Even in the throes of summer, every tree was dead and wilted. Orange pine needles and dried wildflowers padded the steps beneath my feet. The air, a cold dead wind, retreated through the brush with the ebb of the sea before a

tsunami. Nearby, the concessions and gift shop stood vacant and neglected. There wasn't anything alive this side of the entrance except an overwhelming sense of coiled darkness.

The gate creaked.

Caelan shouldered past his brother and headed around the ticket booth. August, a black wolf more grayed around the muzzle, followed with flattened ears. The remaining sheriffs passed beneath the entry and dispersed like black ghosts as the rest of the false pack entered.

Big, healthy werewolves, of muscle and thick fur and blood-tested fangs: how could they lose?

I passed a sign covered in thin boards which had once upon a time directed excited visitors to the main exhibits.

A leaf skittered across the ground before me. My light caught its erratic dance, and then the wind roared through. Trees snapped. Shingles whipped into the air. A force, invisible, hard, slammed into my chest. I fell backward into Caelan. The wolf caught my shoulder without biting down and kept me upright. The flashlight rolled along the ground. Behind us, the werewolves straightened or rolled back onto their feet as I snatched the flashlight.

Three of the last wolves past the turnstile barked. I turned. One, a lanky, gray wolf, had stretched up on his hind legs, pressing his paws on something invisible in the dark. I flashed my light towards them; a faint shimmer of some kind of barrier glistened in the thin air.

The wolf ran several feet in either direction along the invisible blockade, but there was no opening to be had.

We were trapped.

That was when I heard it, the slithering, the crawling, the climbing. Gargoyle-like figures on rooftops. Hisses in the tiger's den.

And a voice, calling without words; without words, and yet I understood.

Caelan crouched beside me, sticky fur gleaming copper. I climbed onto his back, let the flashlight drop and bounce.

The light caught dozens of white, lifeless eyes. For a moment they waited, unblinking soldiers awaiting command.

And then the dead descended.

chapter 29

THE CONDUIT

Werewolves crawled as carrion possessed, down roofs, over enclosure fences, as if pain or circumstance did not matter. They attacked without regard for their own injuries, lurched forward in a sickening, putrid mass. Those squatted retained their human features. The rest spanned the endless range of transformation: from repellent, four legged beasts with tapered snouts and sunken eyes to bipedal creatures of terrible distortion.

Their smell alone—resin, musk, hot garbage—was enough to make a smart person run the other way, but there were only brave people here tonight, and stupid ones.

Remembering James, I told myself they were people once, and my friends were people still, but as tooth met claw and the first wave shattered the living ranks, I saw unstoppable, ravenous monsters all around.

There was a voice in the chaos, calling me on with the chilled patience of a glacier. I turned my head to locate the sound, trying to determine if it was in my head or in the fray.

I thought I glimpsed my grandfather's hateful face emerging from an arena marked animal presentations, then the scrawny older man with white eyes and broken teeth threw himself onto August. Twisting around, the sheriff sank his teeth into the man's skull and flung him back into the horde. A smaller werewolf, brown, bipedal, ripped a second zombie from the sheriff's back, leaving one arm clutched in his dark fur. A moment later she yanked that loose, waving it over her head with a wild howl.

Winnie.

The pair meted out destructive glee upon anything within fifteen feet of their bright eyes and wagging tails.

Caelan surged ahead, bowling through filthy bodies, taking the paths

less travelled as we moved through the landscape in search of the necromancer.

The flashlight kicked around beneath combatants, illuminating red fangs and clouded eyes. Hulking bodies smashed against each other, fell apart, and crashed again in the bleak recesses, a silhouette carousel of the dead and soon to die.

The path ahead split into two distinct trails. Caelan paused, tilting his back to regard me, and in that moment, a woman in jeans and a ragged blouse sprang. She lunged from a pile of rocks at our rear, claws hooking my ankle. Her other hand struck Caelan's back. He kicked free, only to headbutt a male version of the reanimated corpse. I wrapped my arms around the sheriff's neck, but the female was strong. We were nearly the same height, but her muscles were of a different construction and brute force. Her grip climbed from my ankle to my waist, and then the dead weight was too much and I fell. We tumbled between the sheriff's legs.

As the sheriff dealt with the male, he stopped a split second to snap one of the woman's legs up into the air and drop her again. Her face smashed into the pavers and I was able to roll on top. The woman screeched into my ear, blonde hair ripped from her scalp in moldy clumps as she twisted. I pinned her arms down. She thrashed against me, straining upright. She rose off the ground a few inches, but a deep pocket of strength arose in me and forced her back.

Caelan had grappled the man onto his knees, flexible paws gripping the man's shoulders as he ripped the head from the corpse. He backed up, hind claws sliding in the fat of the woman's thigh, chunking out a section of brown meat. I scrambled back to let him deal with her.

To my left, four of the undead sprang upon a grizzled brown wolf. The wolf stumbled backward, spinning in narrow circles, cleaving great chunks from bone to no avail.

There were always more teeth.

One of the dead hooked its hand in the brown wolf's snout, tearing its nose off in the process. Yelping, the wolf careened blindly into Caelan, dragging its attackers along with it. I threw myself to the side as they converged. Someone's paws crushed my shoulder, but I was able to drag myself free.

I ran to the signpost, ripped off a board (Golden Tamarins ->East), and battered the face of the nearest monster as Caelan yanked them off his

ally one by one, but it was too late. The wolf lay in a puddle of blood with a half-pinned female gnawing its ear.

Caelan circled me, ears flat, sniffing in the direction of the fallen.

The wolf's paws twitched. It rolled onto its feet as if having gained a second wind. The female stopped gnawing and crouched under its belly.

A chill swept through my body, a pressing cry to leave this behind.

In a deft motion, Caelan struck low, forcing the wolf off balance, his fangs working the front paw off at wrist. Shutting his eyes against assault from the female, he shook and tore the second foot off. On bones, the brown wolf, unsteady, toppled. The sheriff took the bottom of its gnashing jaw next.

I beat at the female's head, forcing my sign between her teeth and Caelan's ear. As he moved to address her, something huge and black smashed into his side.

The Louisiana reaper snapped his fangs into Caelan's shoulder, attempting to wrap his paws around his younger brother's neck, forcing him onto the edge of an exhibit pit. Caelan recovered his footing to tear into August's cheek, but the damage was done.

He'd separated us.

As realization dawned, an enormous, gray-backed wolfman drove me into the ground. His face was nearly skeletal. Wide jaws of sinew and bone cracked open. A foul odor washed across my face. I jammed the board into its mouth and pressed my hands into its shoulders, forcing it back. The board splintered. My fingers slipped straight through the meat of its shoulders. Its giant head sunk lower. Spit slapped my cheek.

A brown, bipedal wolf wrestled it away, using the two halves of my sign to smash its head to bits and pin the flailing body to the earth.

"Thanks," I panted, standing.

A padded hand struck the side of my chin. I tripped on a curb and hit the ground, conscious of a heavy weight against my chest. Huge, hairy feet smashed weeds around my throat. Bracing her foot on my shoulder, she grabbed my arm and started to twist. I gasped in pain. She leaned down. Eyes of wicked glee, separated from mine by the length of a contorted snout, made it clear Winnie had no intentions of being quick or easy.

"I don't have time for your shenanigans," I said.

The gaze staring back was narrowed, angry, then rapidly surprised as the sound of the gun shot rang out. Dropping my arm, she staggered back.

At the sound, the pair of sheriffs disentangled.

Clutching her chest, Winnie dropped to one knee.

The hairs along August's back rose. We made eye contact across the putrefied battlefield, and I knew right then if I didn't find the necromancer in the next few minutes, I'd be torn apart.

Light streaked across the sky over Winnie's pointed ears. She fell onto her back, dead.

Whatever the light was, it hit the barrier and exploded. There came a sudden downward rush of air, of smoke and flame, and the barrier I thought might have given way.

At the second streak, I was certain it had.

The earth trembled in a shower of dead leaves ripped from branches. Flames roared over an aviary exhibit. A third thin streak exploded the near the heart of the fighting. The world flared into a brilliant summer dawn of rot and red; then the body parts rained down.

A paw sizzled in the weeds beside me. The grass burned in frenzied fire, sheets of ember and flame whipped into the air.

Winnie pushed herself onto her feet.

August lifted a single paw, hesitant, as if perhaps he thought or hoped the wound had not been fatal. In that moment Caelan struck him in the throat, unrelenting in his grip as August bit down at the top of his head and shoulders, until he'd backed his older brother up and into the exhibit pit.

Come home, baby doll.

The tone bypassed my ringing ears.

Green-eyed, Winnie extended a paw to help me up. I refused her hand, but nodded. "Take me," I instructed, and what emerged from its mouth was a perfect copy of the woman's voice in human skin.

"Oh, I will, little lamb."

In great, bounding strides the werewolf raced through the flames and into the aviary. The building's roof sagged in a wave of cascading embers. After a glance toward the fray and a skeptical assessment of the ceiling, I followed it into a burning corridor.

Flames dripped behind exhibit glass in silent spectacle, falling onto abandoned floors. A dead sparrow slapped against the panels several times before finding a crack into smoking, navy starlight.

The air filled with smoke, swallowing the werewolf's shape, but we were close. Thick plumes poured through a distant exit. I stumbled out the other side, coughing.

A dark mass slammed into my stomach. I tumbled forward, swatting at the shape of a muzzle and smacked a panting Caelan across his snout. He nosed me onto my feet.

The remaining roof caved. Smoke and dust rose over the landscape and we stood alone from the fray.

Another meteoric streak colored the tips of the dead trees, but this one splintered mid-air. Heated metal fragments poured down in glittering trails, following the curve of a second invisible barrier, this one sturdier than the first.

We were close.

A metal plaque thunked onto the root-bound sidewalk. Across the barrier, Winnie stood behind a faded information board about lions. She winked one green eye and leaped into the purported lion's den.

I had started after her when Caelan snagged the hem of my shirt. Though he couldn't speak, I understood the basics of canine posture, let alone the unsettled look in his eyes.

"We've got this," I told him, pulling away.

The mottled blacks and grays of his throat brushed my shoulder with every step as the wolf kept an even pace. Flames died in the weeds near the edge of the barrier. We stepped over them and passed unhindered to the brink of the enclosure.

Twenty feet below stretched the remnants of a moat. Beyond the exterior perimeter were boulders and overgrown grassland, young trees and wide swatches of dirt. Though the animals were dead, their paths, paced day in and out, lingered on as deep depressions. The far wall, where keepers would've accessed the animals, was layers of rock with a tunnel built into the base.

In one of the dirt stretches, stood a man guarded by bipedal werewolves, including Winnie. Green fire burned in a stone ring before them. Their shadows reached toward the stars. Those still possessing eyes, and even those without, turned their pointed snouts our direction.

Their master did not. His eyes were clouded, the muscles in his face expressionless. Drool glistened on his chin, and yet I knew in my bones he saw us.

Ingram Hayes was a tall, dark-skinned man who had been handsome once, and his ageless face still held the echoes of an attractive nature. He stood shirtless, thick muscles tattooed with names and patterns indiscernible

at our current distance. One side of his head was shaved and similarly tattooed; the rest was pulled into black dreadlocks which tumbled off his shoulder. A macaw feather brushed his neck, hung on a jade earring carved to resemble a two-headed serpent.

Bound to the restrictions of a wolf's vocal chords, Caelan growled.

Another blast of fire exploded overhead. The earth surrendered a mighty shiver.

Color, a rich mahogany, returned to the necromancer's eyes. "Climb down, girl," he commanded in a tone smooth and cool. The cold of his beckoning numbed the pain in my shoulder, muffled the ringing dread in my ears. "Be part of something larger than life."

I didn't want to take a single step nearer, but I had to. There wasn't any other way. Still, I waited, counted the werewolves. Six, plus the newly formed Winnie. I looked over at my companion. Scabs covered his snout. He was a good fighter, but seven and the wendigo?

Gently, I touched the wolf's cheek. "Stay here, Caelan. Please."

He shook my hand off and set his claws on the exhibit edge, amber eyes intense and focused. Never had I considered Caelan's death beyond the initial moment of shooting him, but on the threshold of the lion's den I found myself terribly afraid for him. After spending his entire life trying to climb out of a pit, he was gonna die in this one.

Counting to ten, I tangled my fingers in his fur. The night was in its prime, but as dawn broke, whatever happened would have played out. In just a couple hours, minutes, really, everything would be resolved. I just had to get there, start the process. Just survive, a little at a time.

The necromancer raised his arms in a welcoming gesture. Clenched in his left hand was a ritual knife. "Alone, girl, and I'll let your pet go."

"Like you let Samson and Igor go?" I called, balling my hand into a fist. Caelan echoed me with a snarl.

Ingram's eyes narrowed.

The zoo had been constructed before lawsuits changed safety rules: it wasn't as steep or guarded as it would have been if built today. Climbing into the desiccated moat was easy. Caelan took me on his back and we were down. From there, it was a short spring onto the flat land. Without a gardener's maintenance, small trees had taken up residence in the area, that is, until the necromancer moved in. Not a single leaf hung from their withered boughs.

We stopped beside one tree. Using the knife as a pointer, Ingram offered Caelan a chance to leave. Tail lashing, the wolf curled back his lips. As one, the other wolves returned the gesture.

“I noticed your sister isn’t here this evening.”

“She’s resting,” I said. “This isn’t the place for a pregnant woman.”

The man swore. The wolves swayed with the necromancer’s emotions, mindless, unbreathing creations unless he instructed them otherwise. He rubbed the feather on his ear. “She’s a real piece of work.”

I frowned, unsure if I should step closer to get in range of bleeding Ingram, or stay where I was. For now, I decided to play nice. He hadn’t done more than call us, and I wasn’t eager to unleash the creatures beside him, especially without evidence that the wendigo was inside him.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

He twisted his wrist toward me, using the blade’s edge to underline a name inked upon his skin: *Rhetta Pavlou*. “She’s my wife,” he said. “My bride, my servant, my doll.”

“No,” I said, “No, she’s not. She wouldn’t.”

He laughed, a thunderous crackle through the air. “Were you ever able to make her do anything she didn’t want to do?”

Rhetta had come back from death, hadn’t she? She was undead, a creature a necromancer could command, right? It wasn’t because she wanted to. No. Not my own sister. She wouldn’t have served Ingram Hayes this on purpose.

I held my tongue.

“I thought so,” Ingram continued. “She does what she wants, girl, and what she wants is her freedom. She’d kill for freedom. As long as she offered a replacement, I agreed.”

“Why get rid of her for me?”

The necromancer wore a pointed smile. “Werewolves are creatures of magic. Can’t wield it any more than a fish can cause a tsunami. We need a conduit, and a particular type at that.”

Pain flared up my arm. My body tensed, flinched away from the source with a startled cry.

Ears flat, tail tucked, Caelan dropped my wrist from his mouth. He licked the blood off my shaking fingertips. Hand clutched to my chest, I understood his intent, wanted to act strong, but the only words I could vocalize for a few raw seconds were four letters long.

The necromancer stilled. The color of his eyes snapped to a striking emerald. He drew a dagger along the skin of his forearm, chanting soft French.

Emerald flames whipped around his feet. The dead marched.

Caelan crouched in front of me, snarling. All but Winnie leaped. He disappeared into the writhing mass. Every so often his head would burst through, but another would cover it and he'd be back in the fury of limbs.

The lone holdout stood on her hind legs, head at a funny angle. Behind her, the necromancer turned his arm over the fire. Flames licked his bleeding forearm. When the first drop hissed to emerald smoke, Winnie darted forward faster than I could run, crushed me against her chest and threw me before the fire at Ingram's feet.

The man set his foot on my knee and stooped.

Long fingers lifted my chin. "There's still room on my shelf for you, doll." Ingram, more accurately, the thing possessing him, moved to kiss me.

I slapped him, hefting a hot stone from the fire's edge into my bitten hand and smashing it into his chest.

The rock hit him at the breast bone in a flash of embers, but no blood raced over his inky designs. Grimacing, he wiped it off. This close, Ingram's facial structure seemed in double, as if a second skull with different features pushed against his skin.

Icy fingers closed around my throat. I inhaled sharply, once, twice, his grip tightening. I clawed at him, but my nails couldn't break the skin. He lifted me into the air, higher and higher, the muscles of his arms convulsing, changing forms as if it were a trick of the light.

Within seconds, the wendigo stood gigantic and naked in place of the necromancer. Veins throbbed beneath its ashen, tattooed skin. Every rib, every bone, was visible, pulled together by sinewy muscle and coated in a waxy pallor running from its head to its hooved hind legs. Its skull was elongated, cervine. Tined antlers curled away from its ears. Its head tilted into a smoking, throaty wail. It grinned, mouth filled with rows of razor-edged teeth.

Sparks flooded my vision.

My fingers slipped across the gun. My muscles weren't working right. I couldn't aim, but lifted and fired nevertheless.

The pressure released in one shrill screech and I was flat on the ground, stunned, motionless, staring up into the bleak night.

The wendigo staggered backward, covering one eye. Blood oozed between its bony fingers. With an earthshaking thump it hit the ground, tripping across Caelan, who'd hauled himself and the four remaining werewolves underfoot.

Shrieking, the wendigo kicked him in the head. The wolf took it with an open mouth, opening a gash above the wendigo's heel, then the fresher Winnie was commanded into the fray.

I reached for the necklace.

With freakish speed, the wendigo rose over me, twenty feet of gaunt terror. Moonlight glinted off the razor's edge of its claws. I scrambled backward too late. With an electric screech the demon slashed its nails across my chest with enough force to spin me face-first into the dirt.

I rolled onto my back, stomach on fire. Blood sheeted over my shirt.

A tawny snout pressed into my wound. I flinched, punched the wolf hard; but it was intense brown eyes that met mine. *Calico*, I thought dimly, tasting blood on my lips. What was she doing here?

Before I found enough air to ask, ears flat, tail tucked, she leaped across my legs and bowled into the mass surrounding Caelan. Perhaps curious at the abrupt intrusion, the wendigo followed her.

When I tried to stand, painful spasms exploded down my spine. I tried to scoot closer instead, slipping in my own blood. If I couldn't move, I needed the wendigo to come to me, I needed it to bleed on me or the ground beside me. Attempting to draw its attention, I emptied the clip into it. Each shot it jerked backward, grinning something wicked.

When the last shot clicked free, I let the panic rise to the surface of my expressions and pressed the trigger so it would hear the frenzy of emptied clicks. Pain clouded my vision, morphed the battle into pulsing shadows between waves of nausea and blood loss.

When it moved forward, I chucked the emptied weapon at its head. The gun bounced away harmlessly. The bloody heel was so close, right there dripping to the ground, just a little closer...

With a single eye of smoking starlight, it loomed over me, raising its arm for a second strike that would doubtlessly fling me across the lion's den before I got a drop.

Caelan sank his teeth into the wendigo's elbow. His momentum and weight dragged the thing into a crouch where *Calico* was able to leap upon its back, chomping wildly at the base of its neck.

Pain blistered through my organs. My legs weren't working. I couldn't walk, couldn't stagger, had to drag myself across the ground, past twitching limbs and gnashing teeth.

A tremendous yelp echoed through the enclosure. The wendigo had jammed its claws into Caelan's throat. He dropped instantly, surrounded by the last of the undead werewolves.

Unweighted, the wendigo slammed its back into the enclosure wall, once, twice. Calico's grip slipped, paws digging for purchase on the monster's anemic muscles. As she released, the wendigo shoved its hand into the scruff of her neck and hurled her on the rocks. Her back smashed into the stone at an odd angle and she crumpled. She rose weakly, slipped backward again, unable to stand.

Over bone and sharp stone I crawled; things were dragging, dark blood was spilling out, and I remained inching ever closer but never fast enough.

The wendigo kicked her until she fell flat. Its long fingers flexed around one of the wilted young pines. It snapped the tree at its trunk and stalked toward the she-wolf wielding its makeshift spear. Their shadows glowed in the firelight. The wendigo lunged. I couldn't see what it'd done until it stepped away. The alpha lay impaled, the trunk shoved through a pocket of soft flesh around her stomach.

The wendigo turned toward me, mouth open in a gleaming smile, eye a gaping hole.

To its right, Caelan pulled himself over a twitching torso. He crept forward unnoticed, snagged the fleshy part of its calf and tore muscle from bone.

With a scream that made my world shiver, the wendigo whirled. Caelan sprinted for me; it followed, grabbed the wolf around his neck and wrestled him into the earth mere feet away. And here, I realized, was the disadvantage of being a wolf. The wendigo had hands and powerful limbs with a wide range of motion and flexion. With his body subdued, Caelan had only teeth. The wendigo tore into him.

I ripped the necklace off my throat, held it tight in my bloody fist and struggled for a fistful of sandy blood. I repeated the words.

Nothing happened. I tried again, sinking the black sapphire into my blood and a handful of muddied drippings from the earth.

Nothing. Maybe it needed to be undiluted. The only option left was

reaching the source.

The wendigo lifted Caelan off the ground. It dug its hands into the sheriff's snapping jaws and pried them apart.

Caelan's hind legs kicked and beat at the wendigo's chest, scoring away chunks of purple flesh and gore. It pulled harder, cracking back his jaw.

The wendigo was so absorbed in its destruction its eyes never left its foe. It was luck I didn't get stepped on as I shoved the sapphire into my wrecked side. Blood gleamed in the eerie firelight as I removed it, mumbling the spell so fast the words slurred and I wasn't sure anymore if I was asking for an end or a miracle.

I stretched far as I could, straining toward the wendigo's tattered calf.

Caelan's shadow drooped. There was a faint whine, then silence.

With a final push of effort, I slammed the sapphire into the wendigo's leg.

Its misshapen head turned. Beneath its blood-splattered brow, sunken eyes regarded me as if I were a mosquito.

Half and again through the words, the slender cold hand curled around my wrist. It laughed, a raucous, deep bellow, and flung Caelan's body onto me. My face smashed into the ground. The world became a crushing vice. No matter how I pushed, I couldn't move my arms or turn my face. I could feel the wolf's weak strain to drag himself off me, when came deeper pressure—a heel on his back perhaps, then a bone-crunching crack and a sudden, sharp limpness to the sheriff. There was nothing to breathe but dirt and sticky fur.

My air left in strained gasps and finally ran out.

chapter 30

MINE

A soft hiss. The coarse caress of ash and sand across my cheek, humid air against my skin and the warmth of a hidden sun.

Grey flakes skipped and swirled into an overcast morning. Crows darkened the rocks along the enclosure. Every so often one hopped nearer to the carnage, but a paw would twitch or the wind blow and send it flying back to keep hoarse vigilance with its brethren. Nearby, having taken the brunt of the alpha and the reaper's assault, and a helpful bullet to the eye, lay the body of the Second Head, Ingram Hayes.

A dry, choking sensation rose in my throat. I coughed. The muscles in my back seized. My lungs constricted. I coughed again, shallower, then came another, and another, until my heart raced and nausea filled my veins.

Pain burst through my chest, followed by a memory of crushing weight and panic.

Calling for Caelan, I sat up. My fingers sank into cold ash. I lifted a handful to the wind, watched it speckle my naked skin and the sun-warmed stones of the extinguished fire. Rough, blistered scars marred my skin from breast to hip.

I touched the angry marks amidst dried blood and caked ash; the wendigo's strike appeared to have been seared shut.

The heat of the morning and the pain of the night did nothing to quell a cold emptiness down deep in my stomach. Ronan claimed Rhetta had been 'saved' in a similar manner, hadn't he? I struggled to remember his words, couldn't even place the topic of our conversation. Something about rising from the ashes.

More importantly, where was Caelan? Where was the wendigo? Had I been dreaming, or had Talon's alpha—

The breeze carried a raucous symphony of crows. Somewhere below the volume of their discordant shrieks emerged a high-pitched whine.

I turned my head.

Calico lay impaled. Blood clotted the spot where the wendigo had drove the splintered end of the tree into her, a thick black mass on her tawny pelt. A crow alighted on the snapped pine and eased closer to the quivering rise and fall of her chest.

“Hang on, Cal!” I shouted, standing. Dizziness amplified the weakness in my legs, but they were working. Lifting my feet clear of the stone ring, a flash of darkness caught my eye.

A terrible thundercloud of a wolf descended into the pit with the meticulous awareness of the living. Matted in bleak crimsons, the fur along its spine rose in an electrified ridge as it sighted me.

August.

Impulsively, I staggered back into the ring, bending for a rock.

His lips peeled back in a snarl. The wolf picked his way across the exhibit carrion, head low, rumbling threats through his fangs. He approached, circling the ring with a throaty rumble.

Wary, I hefted my rock.

Ears flat, the giant wolf stretched across the ash to sniff the scarred punctures where Caelan had clamped down on my wrist. His snout roved the crusted, ashen space between my chin and neck then inhaled against my sooty hair.

Calico whined again. Her head lifted our direction, but when her body failed to respond, she sank back.

“We need to help her,” I pleaded to the massive animal. His snout passed across my wounded chest. I stiffened, resisted the urge bash his snout with the rock, to give him any reason to snap. “August, please—”

The wolf’s fangs clamped down.

A numbing, dull tingle prickled in my shoulder, running through to my fingertips. The rock tumbled from my hand.

I felt the crack more than heard it.

Grip a tightened vise, August shook. The force flung me off my feet. A violent, wrenching pain tore through my body. My arm slapped into the ash, broken and dislocated. The wolf stood over me.

The stench of spoiled intestines filled the air.

My pulse climbed into my throat. Cold air seeped into the

atmosphere, a glacial toxin.

A pair of brown, burned paws shuffled into view behind August's legs.

Winnie sprang upon the Louisiana sheriff's back. With a vicious snarl, August spun to bite the annoyance. The sound ceased the moment he latched onto her. Flinging his undead girlfriend into the dirt, he sprinted for the zoo keeper's tunnel and disappeared into the dark.

Winnie pursued him to the shaded entrance before stopping. Beside her, a smaller, childlike wolfboy reclined on his skinny haunches to scratch a maggot out of his ear.

I sat up, grabbing my shoulder. A hot rush flooded my arm from several deep punctures. Even a featherlight touch against the dirty blood brought me to tears. I could feel the distorted separation and immediate swell. The bones were fractured and broken in multiple places. I turned my head to side-eye the damage near my clavicle. The mess of blood and bone made me throw up, the motion of which induced further agony.

Leaning over, trying to figure out if I should stay with Cal or try exiting through the tunnel to find help, I spotted something small and blackish brown weaving through the exhibit rocks. A weasel, I guessed, or an otter.

Winnie and her companion followed its progress, allowed the slight creature to walk within range of their claws.

As it approached, I got a better look. While its tail and body were long and low-slung, its posture seemed feline, along the lines of an overgrown housecat. It carried itself with the grace of one, though it was far more primitive than Samson or Igor. It padded across the grey landscape, set its paws on the stone ring and peered at me through eyes the essence of a moonlit rainforest, eyes unmistakable in the lightening sky.

The edge of its tail swished across the ashes.

Welcome back, a voice rasped, an echo that resounded in my skull, breached the virgin safety of my mind.

The animal bowed forward cautiously, head bobbing, stubby ears perked. Tentative, it peered into my eyes, daring to set its paw lightly against my toes.

I flicked his paw away. With the scars, my arm and Cal's urgent needs, sustaining a train of thought longer than 'shit' was a challenge. "Zakar?" I asked; I didn't have anything else to call him.

Look at you, bright-eyed and not bushy-tailed. Stiff whiskers brushed my side.

“Have I died?”

His tongue lapped at the blood of my forearm. *Interesting.*

I winced. It hurt, but his touch brought a frightful seduction of my nerves, a guilty pleasure in my anemic state of mind. “You,” I hissed, unable to lift my hand and strike him. “You—”

As if sensing my budding anxiety, the cat backed off with a steady purr. *Wendigo, shaman, the Second Head. I am them and a thousand other souls connected to a thousand other titles.* He licked his paw, intense green eyes half-lidded and pleased. *I'm something of a collector, you see.*

“A collector of what?”

He dragged his claws against my knee, a soft swipe that didn't register in my agonized nerves. Pricks of red beaded my skin. He licked them one by one.

I shivered. “What have you done?”

Saved your life from my disappointment of a servant. The cat wound his way around me, bumping his cheek against my spine. Venom dripped from the glare he offered the crumpled body of his host. He moved to the corpse's head, and in a minute or so returned to my side, proudly depositing the jade and feathered earring of the Second Head, still attached to the ear. *The fool let you get bitten.* He nipped my finger. I jerked away to instant regret. Fire burned through my arm. *I warned him. Save the talk for after you kill her. If you've got to spout off something, lie. But noooo, he starts a conversation.*

I tried to limit my reactions. “What are you?”

He flashed a thin smile, flicked his ash-covered tail across my thigh. *Didn't you feel it back in my shop?* he purred, kneading my lap. *Can't you feel it now? The electricity? The raw, animal magnetism of overwhelming desire?*

My skin crawled at the memory. “What are you?” I repeated, knocking him back.

He lifted his chin, tail straightening into an exclamation point. *Why, your humble familiar, of course.*

“Bullshit.”

Every good witch needs one.

“I'm not a witch.”

No, he agreed in a musical drawl. *You aren't. But you are mine, my*

doll, my animate effigy. You gave yourself to me.

It had been written as a binding spell, designed to tie the spirit to an object, specifically, the black sapphire. “The spell,” I muttered. The stone had acted the conduit to tie my soul to this, this thing’s.

Lies can be written as well as spoken, my dear. Zakar settled back on his haunches and yawned. *Let's deal with the dead, now, shall we?* His slender neck craned toward Winnie and the child. *Corpses tend to run off the reservation. Minds of their own, so to speak. When you haven't got your hands in there, wandering souls slither into the vacancy.*

I sat in stony confusion, cradling my useless arm.

If the cat could've, he'd have rolled his eyes. Instead, his nose twitched and he sauntered back around me. He curled into a tight ball and settled his chin across my ankle. *You unknowingly used the dead to chase off that nasty, nasty reaper. Imagine how easy it'll be once you've learned how to tether. I'll help you this time, as familiars—which I am, by the way, in loose terms—are wont to do. Shut your eyes now. Feel the pull, reach into the cold eternal as it flows along.*

I closed my eyes. Even shut, Zakar was there, in the shape of the low-slung cat but now one with fire burning beneath the dark fur over its heart. In a monochrome vision of my imagination, I didn't hurt here in the grey, frosted cold.

I saw Winnie and the child beside the tunnel.

A thread connected me to them, a thin seam of light running from their feet to mine. I gathered the strands in my hands, a soft rush of creation and bliss; pliable energy rather than malevolence.

You can cut, and you can keep; and if you are quick sometimes you may even mend.

When I wound the string around my fist, the wolves came forward. I thought about the crows; their lupine eyes fell at once on the gathering birds.

Zakar hissed from the leaden grass. The blazing cat slashed through the lines. The werewolves dropped dead.

I opened my eyes to the world of life, color and sound.

Regrettably, we don't have time to fool around.

“We?”

I have fallen in love with you, the cat declared in a matter-of-fact tone. For all the distrust I had in a demon, I couldn't sense anything disingenuous in his odd statement. *I care about your wellbeing. Your body needs help. I*

have spent lifetimes searching for the bright potential inside of you.

I touched the sticky tooth impressions on my arm. “Well, tough. I’m not any better than Rhetta now.”

There followed a long pause and a curiously cheery, *We’ll see.*

“I won’t help you.”

You have that choice, he conceded. You won’t resist forever, mon amour. We are the outcome of Hades and Persephone. He loved her the moment he laid eyes upon her; but she did not feel the same until they were already bound. It isn’t love you have for me, yet, but you feel it, don’t you? You’ve wreaked havoc to reach me. Zakar licked his shoulder. One green eye winked. *I’m blushing under this fur coat.*

“I didn’t—”

But you did. And you’ll harvest more souls for your bridal bouquet. The voice grew colder, deeper, a roar on my inside. My heart squeezed as if a hand of darkness massaged my pulse. Then the cat stretched his umber toes and rolled onto his feet. He ducked beneath my hand. The feeling subsided; my heartrate dropped. *You are my other half, âme sœur, he panted. The sweet spring to my winter. I will have you, as lightning has thunder, as birth has death. We are inevitable. Your name sits in the place of honor in my collection, Mirele Pavlou. You are a bride of death. Embrace my night or be strangled by it.*

Zakar, the wendigo, the demon, my familiar—whatever he was—lifted his head. His form dissolved on the cold wind.

The chill retreated from my body.

Right arm hanging painfully, I made my way to Cal. It was then I saw Caelan, dumped in the moat, his dark fur covered by two of the night’s deceased. Crows perched around them. Shooing the birds, I walked around to his front and grimaced. The mangled flesh and dislocated jaw made me sick, but I was too drained to throw up, too horrified. I couldn’t help him.

One amber eye blinked.

“Hey,” I said quietly. I would’ve bent to touch him, wanted to throw my arms around him, but my arm was already too strained.

His tail thump-thumped.

“Cal’s in worse shape. I’ll be back,” I promised.

He started to claw himself free.

The closer I got to the alpha, the more I realized there wasn’t anything I could do for her. With my right arm indisposed, I didn’t have the strength to

do more than make her comfortable.

She whined again. I moved around to her front and set her head on my lap, stroking her ears, murmuring thanks and soft encouragement to keep breathing.

Caelan, panting from the effort of freeing himself, observed us through one eye; the other was closed tight and swollen, before he staggered through the tunnel.

When he returned, several others—human and shifted—followed. The vast majority were at Calico's side, including a woman dressed in an EMT uniform.

A small wolf with more humanistic features pulled me to one side when Caelan waved them off. The sheriff had shifted back into a human and thrown on an undershirt and pants. The thin cotton did little to hide his cuts and bruises. Slung over his arm was a large plaid button-down. He walked with a distinct limp and kept touching his jaw, but he was healing.

What I wouldn't give for some rapid regeneration right about now.

He passed me the shirt, helped me slip it around my shoulders and button up. I felt stupid and looked stupid, but I couldn't get my right arm into the sleeve, couldn't move it, without severe pain.

“Guess I won't be wearing a two-piece at the beach this summer,” I said dumbly.

“Color me disappointed, Miss Davins.” Whatever tentative cheer he'd found vanished at the sight of his brother.

With folded arms and narrowed eyes, August, who had taken the time to throw a sheet over Winnie, watched us limp along.

As we passed, Caelan stopped to press his forehead to his brother's and share a private word.

A horrid screech had me cringing and turning back toward Cal with wide eyes. I couldn't see her around the rapidly working medical team, but hoped she was okay.

“She's tougher than she thinks,” Caelan said, ushering me through the tunnel. “Most wouldn't have survived the night. Talon is in good paws going forward, if she manages to scrub off the art theft.”

Sweating, dizzy, uncertain of what had happened and was to come, I stayed quiet.

We wound our way back into the daylight and through the night's wreckage of ruined bodies and scorched earth.

I faced the welcome breeze. “Why’d she come?”

“She requested to,” Caelan said. “I couldn’t let her in with the rest; she may be Talon’s alpha, but she’s still a civilian. It was better for her to sneak along the fringe where she has experience avoiding conflict.”

“This is exactly what she was upset at Stephen for doing. She’s got Aiden and the rest of the pack at an already vulnerable moment.”

“Ms. Finn may be a thief and a troublemaker, but she’s a good leader. You’re her pack, Marcy. She wouldn’t sacrifice her family. They don’t know you. They don’t care. But no matter what she says in the heat of the moment, she will always care.” He stopped me very gently by my uninjured elbow. “Why don’t we find a shady spot and sit a spell?”

Fanning my neck, I shook my head. “I can keep pace. Werewolves are little healing saunas, aren’t they?”

“You’re overheating.” Frowning, he made me sit on the ground in the reedy shade of a blackened pine. A wash of red discolored the shirt. With my permission, he undid a couple of buttons and examined my shoulder. “You ain’t healing,” he decided, rocking back on his heels. “Not at my speed if I were to have a similar injury.”

“Is that normal?”

Taking my hand, he ran his thumb along the jagged scars his teeth had cut from my wrist. Caelan had made the correct call, yet I never wanted to be a werewolf; to be one now, of an extremely restricted variety, I didn’t have the effort or energy to grapple with.

“I’ve never bitten someone with the intent to turn,” he said. “In the standard werewolf, as the bite scars, the change begins. Sometimes it can take a month for the transformation to take full effect, but you should be recovering. Fast recovery is one of the reasons it was so difficult to catch a werewolf back in the day: bit in the arm at midnight, chopping a cord of wood come dawn.”

All I could think about was Zakar’s jolly, *We’ll see*.

“What I don’t understand,” Caelan was saying, buttoning up my shirt, “is how you got August to stop.”

As we waited in the shade, I told him about Zakar. “He wanted this, Caelan. Everything had been orchestrated to give him the right outcome, except maybe your bite.”

His troubled expression mirrored my own. “So, you’re bound to him?”

“He is bound to me,” I said; the reverse sounded so defeated. “Whatever that means.”

“Reckon it means you might could be the new host. Ingram Hayes and the prior Second Heads have always been human; you being a werewolf, I don’t know what that means for how he jumps in your skin, or what that result will look like.”

A man Caelan later informed me was the sheriff of Vermont, walked up to us and offered to get me to a hospital so Caelan could return to the pit. Caelan declined, explaining he had questions, but even in his pleasant smile his distrust of his peer was evident. He promised to fill the sheriff in, and, once the other had moved off, urged me onto my feet.

“We can't stay.” He glanced over his shoulder as if expecting August to darken our horizon.

When I faltered again, Caelan opted to carry me to his truck. It took some work to figure out the least painful position, but we managed to arrive at the truck without my passing out. There, he set me on my feet, propped open the door and helped me climb inside. I'd perched on the edge of the seat when he looked toward the overgrown, quiet brush and dilapidated signage.

“Something out there?” I asked in a hushed tone, clutching his arm.

“No,” he said. “Just don't want to be thrown off your case.”

Before I could ask what he meant, he took my chin and pressed his lips on mine. It was a kiss of blood and salt, short as a heartbeat and as undeniable as breathing— necessary, sustaining, essential—and beneath that rushed an undercurrent of unexplored meaning.

“So much for being all business.”

“My mistake,” he agreed, palm gentle on my cheek. Soot darkened his nose. “Would you like me to do it again?”

I coughed through a small chuckle. “Well, yeah.”

But someone came up the path. Caelan almost threw me into the center console in his rush to separate. He slammed the door and walked around the front of the vehicle with his head down to hide a grin. I rested my head against the cool window pane and pretended, for one blissful moment, that I was just a girl and he was just a boy and love was all that mattered.

chapter 31

RUN WITH ME

The trip to the hospital was a blurry, unpleasant memory. I didn't remember the car ride or the initial flurry of activity after we'd pulled in: a whirlwind of vitals, IVs and emergency room doctors.

After I'd been stabilized and presented with a graphic summary of the damage August's teeth had rendered and the details of the upcoming surgery required to stitch me back together, Caelan called the head nurse over to inform him I was a survivor of Ingram Hayes and required a guard outside my room.

The first was Lieutenant Mishra-Anderson. She poked her head in to ask after me while Caelan was visiting between shifts. We exchanged pleasantries, but she sounded disappointed, more so in her boss than me. From his stunted replies, I had a feeling they'd had a fight.

At the end of his visit, he passed a folded page of his notepad into my hand, a warning that cameras were in the room, lest whatever beast lay within, or beside me waiting, chose to emerge.

He didn't come by again, though he did check on my progress over the phone. After surgery to repair the immediate damage, the drugs kicked in. I slept, always dreaming of a kingdom woven in thread, and a cold jade throne sat upon by a man with haunting green eyes.

The times I woke, half of them I spent laying in sweat-soaked sheets convinced lions were hunting sheep around a painting across from my bed. As my discharge approached and the dosages waned, the artwork quieted to a plain, watercolor seascape.

In the end, I emerged from the hospital like a mummy from a sarcophagus: unaware of the world's present state, sporting my arm in a cast, my shoulder stabilized and enough painkillers to walk on clouds for a few

days. I called for a taxi and headed for home.

“You don't have anyone to get you?” a nurse asked at my check out. She'd been one of the more attentive staff members. “A relative, a friend?”

“I'm fine.” I sank into a chair to wait for the cab. “Happy to go home.”

“Home's where the heart is,” she hummed.

Being a righty, having that arm rendered useless was a major inconvenience. I dropped my keys twice trying to get into my house. When I wrenched the door open and saw the upturned kitchen table and scattered cat food, I stormed back onto the porch, wiping my eyes.

I couldn't walk inside, couldn't go in there and pick up the pieces. So I sat on the steps in baggy clothes donated by the head nurse's wife, looking out at my neighborhood. Strange cars lined the street, filled every driveway and corner. Mourners for families, other lives Zakar had ... *Rhetta and I* had ruined. I sat watching rusted stains bake on the sidewalk and cried.

Once the tears ran dry, I forced my gaze from the trampled plants and chunks of black fur. I had to get inside and get planning. Samson and Igor were dead. Rhetta had exchanged my freedom for her own, and I was chained to a demon.

Blessed with a familiar. A cold wind touched my cheek, an icy caress along my spine.

And there he was, that long-bodied feline, strolling along the white porch rail. Zakar's fur shone rich mahogany in the sunlight. A dead mouse hung from his jaw. He padded alongside me and deposited the fly-covered creature in my lap.

I know you miss them, he purred, wrapping his tail around his paws. *I would never have killed them, dearest Mirele. Your predecessor was in charge of logistics.*

Lifting the rat by its tail, I flung it into the bushes. “Where are they?”

Innocent green eyes turned on mine. *Who?*

“The rest of Stephen. Samson and Igor. The other werewolves you killed in Avon. They weren't all at the zoo.” If I thought I could've stabbed

Zakar here and now, I would have, but I knew better than to catch a veritable Cheshire cat.

You'll have to ask the necromancer, he replied with a breezy sigh, flipping one ear back against his skull. *Or the smart, fetching specimen of a familiar with the skills to summon Ingram from death.*

I paused. "At what cost?"

Nothing, when you tether through me. But there is...Something I ask for. Zakar twined his way between my legs. *A small favor. Insignificant.*

I frowned. "Go on."

The cat flashed a pointed smile. *Pet me.*

"What?" He repeated his reply, dark toes kneading my leg. I nudged him away with my sneaker. "If this is some sort of perverted—"

Oh, honey, the cat drawled. *Not on our first date.*

Whatever temptation I had for agreeing to his help shriveled to anger. "Get the hell away from me," I hissed.

I'm asking for affection. Zakar sauntered onto the steps. *As a knight asks for a lady's favor. A touch to keep me going through the dark days ahead.*

"So you'll drag his spirit back from hell if I scratch you behind your ear?"

The cat twisted around to lick his shoulder. *I'd get you an audience with the Prince of Wallachia if you'd let me sit in your lap during the meeting.*

I'd heard enough and rose.

Zakar sprawled across the step, stomach turned to the sky. Head hanging off the edge, he watched me leave with a kitten's curiosity. *One day soon, little lamb, the wolves will come for you. You'll want me by your side then.*

There weren't any cars in or around Calico Finn's driveway. The garage doors were shut, the shades drawn. Talon pack's alpha opened the door, dressed in white jeans and a pink chambray shirt.

"Thank God!" she murmured. "He wouldn't tell me where he took

you.”

I hugged her hard as I could with one arm, thanking her a hundred times more. “Are you alright, Cal?”

“I wasn't about to leave Aiden alone to face this new world.” Slung a red purse over her shoulder, she shut the door. “I was about to pick up Aiden and Mila,” she explained. Her attention shifted onto my attire. “Goodness! I hope this isn't all you've got left in your wardrobe. Come on upstairs. Take your sister's clothes for all I care.”

“Later.” Going through Rhetta's belongings wasn't high on my list of priorities. “I'm lucky I still have active insurance. I need physical therapy and at least one more operation, depending on how things heal around my shoulder.”

The woman scowled. “Did you forget who used you as bait to draw out the wendigo? Marcy Davins won't be around long enough to schedule a single PT session.”

“Cal—”

“I'm shocked, *shocked*, they let you alone,” she continued, waving me further into the house.

I followed.

In the kitchen, she opened a high cabinet and removed an envelope. “Ever since Harlowe brought you to the hospital I've been working on a fix. We didn't escape the brink of hell for a reaper to drag you down.”

She passed me the packet. Inside was a new girl. A passport and driver's license with a picture of me I didn't remember taking. But I did recall getting drugged on her couch the night after I pissed off August.

“I can't accept this,” I said with more optimism than I should have. “We're in a new world. Sheriffs don't have to kill.”

“And I don't have to buy new boots this winter, but I will.” Cal pushed the documents into my hand. “We're family, Marcy. Doesn't that mean something to you?”

“My family died years ago.” I folded the envelope edge.

“Well, I haven't,” she huffed, adjusting a grey sleeve cuff. “Neither have Mila and Aiden. Your grandmother wanted you to escape the darkness in this world, Marcy, no matter the cost. You were the only one left who could. Didn't work out as she intended, but that just means you don't have to be alone. You have a pack, if you'll accept us.”

“And Rhetta?”

“Haven't heard from her or Jaz since their flight landed in Dallas.” The alpha seemed troubled, crossing her arms. “They betrayed pack integrity. They tore us apart. You haven't. There's someone else who needs a stable home, and you're perfect for each other.”

I met Cal's brown eyes. “Hmm?”

“You and Mila.” As if sensing my surprise, she added, “Don't be thinking you can run with Harlowe because his brother was foaming at the mouth and got you.” She didn't know Caelan had bitten me first; no one did, except maybe August. “Reapers aren't allowed to turn humans. Their mates are carefully chosen among a select population. Don't believe Harlowe when he claims you can be his. He's prime bloodstock and you're no better than a mutt in the eyes of the Otherworld.”

“I know,” I insisted, feeling flush.

“You better.” She made her way into the hall. “You and Mila are both young werewolves. Learn together. Be a family. Be my family. I can give you a life away from this.”

I traced the edge of the passport. “How?”

The alpha waved a hand at the supposed replica sunflower painting. “I could use someone on the inside, someone with knowledge in the field. One job with the Koi and you'll never have to worry about Mila's college tuition. If you won't think of yourself, think of what you could do for her.”

In the end Cal had to run and get the kids from a friends', so I invited her to a small lunch on Saturday with Lisa, Wyatt, and Caelan.

We stepped into daylight, where I tucked the envelope under my functional arm. “Hey, how long were you conscious during the fight?”

“Instant knockout, sugar. You were cold in the ash when I regained consciousness. I thought I was the sole survivor.”

“Do you remember a cat?”

“A cat?”

I took that as a 'no.' “Did you smell any around?”

She gave me a puzzled frown. “We were in a lion's den, sugar, and I was pinned like an entomologist's butterfly.”

For the rest of the week, I cleaned the house and slept, but not without Gram's revolver on my nightstand and the silvered blade, as a precaution, carefully concealed in a patch sewn inside the arm sling I used with my cast. I collected cat toys and an unopened bag of food to donate to a local animal shelter. Every day I woke up was more of the same ache, the same misery, the same medication, the same sickness in the pit of my stomach that I was now the thing that had torn my family apart. One night, I even cut my thumb on the silver blade from Zakar's shop. It stung and blood splattered my sink, but there was no burn, no smoky hiss or itch beneath the skin to suggest the metal was a problem.

By Saturday, my arm still burned, and the raw blisters on my chest had receded but stung when I moved the wrong way. Showering, or my pathetic struggle to, was a nightmare.

And it didn't help that Zakar would settle into the shadows, offering again to fetch the necromancer in exchange for a gentle pat on the head...

But the person whose touch I wanted, missed, craved, rsvp'd to my invite but kept our communication minimal.

When he showed up Saturday morning, toting a vase of flowers and an apology, he never came within more than a foot of me. I wanted to ask him about it, but Cal popped in with Mila and Aiden, then Lisa and Wyatt arrived soon after.

The alpha left early. She had was hosting a pack meeting to vote on how to proceed: who was coming out to the world now that the Otherworld's secrets were coming to light, who preferred not to, and what that meant.

The rest of us sat on the back deck in the warm afternoon as the sun angled into the trees. Cal hadn't been gone five minutes, when Lisa leaned forward and asked if our neighbor was a werewolf. After the Nokhurst Crossing incident, she'd put two and two together and deduced the pelt on our step belonged to a werewolf, and my rambling about dogs meant Stephen hadn't been a lone wolf.

Caelan entertained her questions, stopping short of identifying himself. He gave me no small amount of praise for my help in the murder

investigation (which to him was unsolved but not to the Otherworld), but asked Lisa if she'd limit sharing her knowledge as there were still some mysteries to resolve as far as who truly ran him down.

Had Rhetta been the ivory flash I'd seen bounding through the side yard after him?

Lisa promised not to out them. They'd been good neighbors and she was moving in a few weeks to New York. Wyatt, while uncomfortable, followed his fiancé's lead.

At last they made their goodbyes. Caelan and I remained on the back deck. I poured us each a shot of bourbon then creaked into the lawn chair beside him.

"Nice friends," he said, watching a mourning dove investigate the bird-feeder I hadn't filled in months. The bird fluttered from branch to branch, checking out the feeder, sometimes pecking empty shells. "More folks of their caliber around and I might feel good taking a day off."

"What's been up with you?" I passed him the drink.

He instead took both glasses and set them on the deck.

The happiness I'd found in being alone with him winged into the woods with the dove, where a dark cat waited in the trees.

"Caelan?"

He tapped the snake on his forearm. "I didn't get a name until I earned one clawing my way out of the pit."

I listened quietly, unsure what to say or where he was going with this. I'd always wondered why he and August had different last names if they were brothers by blood. "Rough."

"Never bothered me. Names don't mean squat when action's kept me alive. Thing is, your name is near all I think about these days: how to keep you safe and what you need and how that's going to happen and how I keep you alive." He turned; something sad and unreadable dimmed his eyes. "I can't kill a spirit, and I won't kill a human, but..."

A pulse of anxiety squeezed my veins. "You kill monsters," I whispered.

He tipped his drink. Bourbon dripped through the cracked floorboards. "August will be here in a couple hours."

"Oh," I said in a hollow tone, desperate to keep my fear at bay. "Gonna be him, is it?"

Caelan stretched his legs, flashed a thin smile. "I have 'til midnight.

Told 'em you had guests over for dinner or it'd have been sundown.”

I eyed his upturned drink then tipped mine over, too. “What about Zakar? He's captured, if you consider me to be the trap.”

Feigned interest entered his voice. “Can you prove he can't leave you for another host or that you can control him?” He knew the answer.

“Well, no.” I hadn't figured out what made Zakar come and go, or where he went.

“We had a debate, Marcy. Positives and negatives. This is the result. Far as I've heard you ain't a werewolf. You lack certain protections. Even if you had them, we've gotten good people killed and forced our kind into national spotlight.”

“That was Zakar, not us.”

“You're connected to him now.” He stood, framed in sunlight, offering me his hand. I accepted and he pulled me beside him. His fingers cupped my cheek and we were right back where I wanted to be.

But this time he kept his distance. “They claim you're evil.”

I chased his gaze as he turned, caught his shoulder and held him still. “I'm not.”

His hand settled over on mine. “The Otherworld's afraid of you, Marcy. Jorge and the team been combing historical documents on L'enfer Requins, the Cunning Folk, and organizations and histories far older; he sends his condolences, by the way.”

I allowed a smile. “Gee, thanks.”

“Far as we can tell, the last time Zakar, or something similar to him, got what he wanted, Germany invaded Poland. I don't believe you're evil, but the thing you're bound to is. If you can't control it...”

“So, killing me is just another kick of the can for a few decades.”

“I reckon a lot shorter, but down the road is down the road and that satisfies leadership.”

“How long have you had the order?” I asked. The notion August was coming, and my memory of what he was capable of, put a new perspective on life as I knew it.

“August went whining to Belzer the same morning. They wanted you done at the hospital during surgery.” He folded each of the lawn chairs and stacked them against the wall. “You recovering any quicker, or same speed?”

“Same.” I patted my stomach and grimaced. “Instead of looking like a hotdog fresh off the grill, I look like I got forgotten in the fridge a week.”

“Appetizing.”

“Awful toddlerish of you to take one bite and leave the rest.”

He moved close enough to brush my hair behind my ear. “I’m sorry for biting you.”

“Had to be done,” I said, though I hated even admitting that. “It spoiled some of Zakar’s plan, I think.”

He slid open the back door and waved me through. Soon as we got inside, he headed to the hall table for the tray holding my car keys. He tossed them to me. “You have to understand, Marcy, any arguments in your favor, especially now that the Otherworld is coming to light, hold no water with that thing tied to you. You have to run. Mrs. Finn has a job lined up for you. I don’t know the location. You get clear of me and call her.”

Keys in hand, I looked up the staircase Marcy Davins had spent her entire existence running up and down. The entry had cooled to somber shadows, evoking a stillness the house never had with Samson and Igor in it.

“You’d be letting the monster go, Caelan.” He’d be leaving me alone with Zakar. I thought about how the thing had massaged my pulse, the way he’d reached inside and manipulated my heart. Doll, he’d called me. What else was possible? What else was planned?

“You’ll be running into a nightmare,” he agreed, looking down. “I’ve seen the other brides. Only your sister’s alive. Heartless, but alive. There’s a slim chance, but that’s more than August will offer.”

“What happens to you if you let me go?”

“I’ll receive the same retirement package as Gannon for causing a lot of deaths in the present instead of letting the future die. I acknowledge that choosing you will get some folks alive today needlessly killed.” He rubbed the serpentine tattoo on his forearm. “Mrs. Finn is wise to sheriffs. I’m not a good person. I won’t ever be a good person.”

“You serve the community current,” I told him. “You protect the werewolves of today. Maybe I am one, maybe not, but I do know you could spare me from Zakar and August both.” I traced his ink. “You’re the only one who would.”

He closed his eyes at my touch, then, when my fingers wound into his, pushed me gently away.

“I want it to be you,” I said, running through possible scenarios in my head, seeking one solution that could keep us both safe and on the same side. I did not want to be alone again. I did not want to be a werewolf. I did not

want to be made into something worse. I did not want to be a reaper's plaything. I did not want Caelan to die for letting me go.

A chill passed through the entry. The shadow of a cat darkened the bottom of one sidelight. Then there was nothing but Caelan, searching my eyes for a different answer. The warmth of his gaze, tentative and worried though it was, washed away the cold.

"I can't outrun my fate, Caelan, but the small mercy I was given is being able to choose the when, where and who. I choose you." I pressed against him, the beginnings of an idea in mind. "Tonight, we'll become a pack of two. Run wild with me through the woods of my true home until our fairytale ends at midnight."

He tipped my chin, all the better to judge whether or not my words were genuine. "That's what you want?"

He killed monsters. I was now a monster. One or both of us could be lying, one or both of us could be telling the truth. Knowing the game was on, I took a deep breath. "It's in my best interest," I said, speaking clear and honest. I moved past him and onto the porch.

A long, feline shadow ducked into the hydrangeas. Thin clouds dotted the sky, a sky that had a few hours left of rich blue before night took hold. Low on the horizon, nearly obscured by thick leaves, hung a thin, waxing crescent.

Caelan was a quiet presence at my back, wrapping his arms around me. "Moon's on the rise. Somebody ought to howl at it, don't you think?"

I asked for five minutes alone to write a message for Lisa. I didn't have family, but after the werewolf incident, I'd drawn up a brief will online leaving the house and its contents to her.

He kissed me just below my ear and told me to meet him by the truck. Once the front door closed, I ran to my bedroom.

Calico's words echoed through my mind as I fished out the box. Sheriffs were smart. They tricked their victims, lured them into a false sense of security. August may not have been a sheep, but from all I'd learned he was a creature of despicable habits.

I checked Gram's gun in my concealed holster, then triple-checked the silvered knife's position in my sling, wondering whether or not Caelan could have spotted the blade this afternoon.

Back downstairs, I moved an edge of the dining room curtain and glanced outside at the strange cars lined up in my neighbors' driveways in the

dying afternoon, and wondered if Augustin La Motte had already arrived.

chapter 32

JOIN OR DIE

The sun dropped below distant mountains, ushering in a silky twilight that draped the forest in mauve reticence. Those vibrant colors deepened to hazy blues as night thickened on the dark side of the valley. The truck's headlights bounced off the winding road, searching the twists for the obscured trailhead.

“Here,” I said, pointing to a widened road shoulder. “Pull over.”

A doe grazed at the cusp of the forest. Her slender neck turned at the rumble of tires on gravel. She tensed.

Caelan put the vehicle in park. The headlights winked out. I watched her leap across the road in the rearview mirror, waiting for the gleam of light from another truck, waiting for August to catch us.

Caelan set his hand on my lap. “He's not here.” He offered a weak, reassuring smile to the question I must've asked a dozen times on the way here. Jorge had given him a GPS signal jammer in case I'd needed a head start; August would get through it quick enough, but we'd have some time.

Opening the door, I wished we could've staged a crash further up the inky road, but a wreck wouldn't do me any favors if I planned on leaving alive.

The night fantastic roared with warbling insects and the rustled awakening of nocturnal creatures. Among the trees, the upcoming twilight faded trunks into dim silhouettes. Something low slung and green-eyed crossed the path in a quake of leaves.

Run. The icy bite of Zakar's voice made me shiver. *For there will be no afterlife but mine.*

“Cold?” Caelan gestured to the backseat. “There's a blanket in there.”

I scanned the quieted brush line. “I'm fine.”

Rubbing my arms, I tilted my chin toward the heavens. Out in the

suburbs we saw a multitude of stars when the power went out, and even then the glow of civilization masked all but the strongest starlight. Caelan came to stand beside me, but his eyes didn't range the stars. They stayed fixed, with a tender intensity, on me.

“Some people live their entire lives without ever looking up,” I began, elbowing him. He took the hint and glanced skyward. “My favorite paintings feature night subjects. We're all underneath the same stars, but the way we view them, it's incredible, the imagination that stems from flickers of someone else's ancient history. I wonder sometimes if van Gogh or Munch had the ability to know the stars as we do, would their starry nights change?”

“Don't know much about painting,” he admitted, brushing a mosquito off his neck. “But I think we all understand the night in our own way. I don't see poetry up there or math or science or mystery. I wasn't raised to think that way or ask those questions, but I still feel affection for it, in a way I can't explain.”

He wasn't stargazing anymore.

There was a soft jingle, then the cool metal of keys touched my palm. “Run away, please.” When I returned the keys, his hand lingered on mine. He lowered his head, tilted my chin with a finger to search my eyes. “Why won't you run, Marcy?”

“I won't be his puppet.” And I refused to let Caelan sacrifice himself in the process, but the thought I buried beneath the starlight. “He's inside my head. He's inside my body, this smooth undercurrent pulling me under. I don't know how to fight or if it's even possible, but I do know he wants me alive. That makes this the right choice, doesn't it?” I asked, the words sour on my tongue.

His hand fell back to his side. “You're a survivor, Marcy. You'll find a way through. You—”

“Stop.” I reached for his hand, pulling him off the trail, hoping he would listen. “I know what has to happen. Be with me.”

Near the trail front, where ample sunlight warmed the earth and gave hungry saplings and weeds a chance to grow, the walking was tough. We slipped and tripped, moved through the dark without a flashlight, a couple of stupid humans. It made me smile whenever he'd curse or grab me for balance.

It was nice to be normal for a change.

The knotted forest floor softened under the weight of pine needles and open spaces. The still night magnified the sounds of us crashing through.

Animals scattered, darting away into hidden depths, all except one. I pushed past hissed urgings, ignored the cat's every appearance. I tried several times to show Caelan, but he never saw those eerie green eyes leering out from the gloom.

The deeper we went, the more my heart beat, louder and louder, a pounding aching in my skull that broke through the underbrush with us. Caelan slipped into the clearing ahead of me, covered in leaves and scratches. As I emerged, he caught me around the waist, drawing my rising chest against his.

His eyes were amber, warm, reflective in the moonlight.

Between his gaze and the cast crushed between us, I felt visceral and alive. The musk of riverbed roots, the gasp of a dying breeze, the gleam of blood on his scratched cheek. Every detail seemed more important, more fascinating, than the one before.

My fingers found his heartbeat and it was hammering like mine, flooded with emotion and the unshakeable understanding that he was mine and I was his.

"Where are we?" he asked in a husky whisper too loud for this unhallowed ground. Beyond his shoulder stood the thick black trunk and barbed limbs of the locust tree. New weeds had replaced the ones I'd dug up in my quest for answers not long ago.

"My last memory of home. Won't see it, but come sunrise there's real nice view of the river that way," I told him, gesturing into the dark.

"Mmhm." His hand slid off my waist. "Have you ever danced in the moonlight?"

Mindful of positioning, I lifted my cast. "Won't this get in the way?"

"Not a problem." We'd left our phones in the truck; the music we had was the night in all its raw, bewitching glory.

A voice raked its claws across my mind, an unending echo of *nonono!* Caelan drew my hand in his and guided it around his neck.

He ran his hand through my hair, gathering it to one side. His eyes were bright but dark, his skin warm, humming, electric, as we swayed—a sign of the wolf waiting hungrily underneath—but he fought it back, chose humanity with a single, stirring kiss.

He put weight behind his kiss and left ideas on my tongue, suggestions of want, need, desire, touch. His control was surrendering to heavy-eyed instinct; he couldn't help himself and I loved that and touched

him with the same wild abandon.

Mirelle! A shadow at my feet hissed. *Do something!*

So I did. My lips fell on the crook of Caelan's neck. I nipped him, teasing, not hard enough to break skin. His hand dropped onto my waist, pulling my body against his with a growl that woke something inside me and had it clawing to break free.

The sheriff ran his hand along my spine, up to my neck, the cat screeching profanities at my feet as he did so. Caelan must not have heard, because it didn't stop him from doing it a second time, in reverse.

His fingers brushed the gun. His expression shifted to a puzzled frown. "What are you fixin' to do, Marcy?"

The cat he couldn't see reclined on its haunches beside him.

"Please don't think of me as coldblooded."

Those intense, amber eyes put the moon to shame. "Killing August won't help anyone."

"Join or die, Caelan." I kissed him hard on the lips, praying this would spare him as my fingers closed around the hilt of the small knife. "You were right. I'm a survivor."

The silvered blade disappeared into his stomach with a twist. His breath caught.

He looked down. Blood spilled between my fingers. I stepped away, wiping my hand on my jeans.

He staggered, wheezing and clutching his stomach. His back hit the locust tree and he slid to the ground in a crack of branches and leaf litter.

The green-eyed cat cackled.

Something small arced across the ground and hit the blood-spattered leaves between us. His keys. Fighting every instinct to help him, I picked them up and turned toward the dark woods.

"I hope you're a survivor, too," I whispered, and left him there to bleed.

THE END.

INTERLUDE I

White sand turned the Caribbean waters a pleasant, reflective blue in the morning sunlight. Mirele Pavlou sat on the end of a dock, the tips of her toes teased by waves.

She sat in a one-piece bathing suit with a plunging neckline that showed off too much skin and far too much scarring. A sheer linen coverup laid beside her, kept from the sea breeze by her fingertips as she braced herself at the dock's edge.

She was alone to experience dawn on a secluded beach unbothered by tourists, set up on a private dock in the guest house of an old lover of Calico Finn.

The scene was picturesque, the water a balmy eighty degrees, the palm trees swaying. The breeze tousled her hair, felt good against her cheeks as she lifted her chin to bask in warm sunlight. Beside her, a rusty feline with a flat face and stubby ears mirrored her enjoyment.

Every so often, they spared a glance at a man swimming a good distance from the dock.

“You're certain he's charmed?” The young woman cast a doubtful eye on the man.

The cat kneaded the warm planks excitedly. He leaned forward, shadow reflected in rippled waves. *If he isn't, he will be upon meeting you.*

Mirele swung her toes harder now, nervous. “Zakar,” she began, scratching the stippled marks of her (mostly) healed shoulder.

There's no other way with an encantado. The cat looked her over pointedly. *They have one weakness, my dear.*

“I don't...I'm not much of a seductress.”

Trust me, he purred, eyes narrow green slits. *I'm not thrilled to share you.*

“I—”

You will do this, the cat said. *You owe me.*

Quiet, she flung a shell into the surf.

You're in for a treat, he continued with a flick of his tail and a yawn.
Are you ready, my dearest darkness?

She pulled her dripping feet onto the dock and offered one ankle to the cat's teeth. She screamed as if it hurt worse and threw herself off the edge of the dock. The water was warm as a salt bath, but Mirele felt cold. A tingling numbness paralyzed her instinct to kick to the surface. She dipped under once, twice, couldn't keep her head above the surface, lost control of her actions until the world filled with bubbles and blue. Her legs kicked sluggishly, her arms went limp under the demon's control. She was his doll.

Water surged into her lungs.

The man had stopped at the high, feminine screech. He turned his head, located the source, and in several smooth strokes reached her side. Her toes dragged through the damp sand as he hauled her onto the pristine shore. When she did not react, he crouched over her and began CPR.

The woman sputtered to life, rolling onto her side, spitting seawater. He laid a concerned hand on her back, and once she'd gasped a hoarse thanks, asked what happened.

She pointed a shaking hand down her leg. Remnants of broken waves bathed her toes in white foam and receded pink. He lifted her delicate ankle as she coughed and wiped her mouth.

Mirele's lungs and stomach burned. She shivered—not from the man's palm on her ankle, nor from the near-death experience—but at the phantom presence of a green-eyed cat on the fringe of the jungle, head low between its shoulders, watching.

INTERLUDE II

A wounded predator was still a dangerous predator. The various denizens of the night respected the bleeding werewolf as such. Crickets quieted, the frogs in the bullweeds hushed, small animals scurried in wide berths around the locust tree. Only the wind carried on undisturbed, a gentle breeze that promised a warm summer morning if Caelan Harlowe could survive the next few hours.

In the distance, a truck rumbled back onto the road, and then nothing but the wind and trickle of water remained to mask his wheezing.

“Fucking hell, Marcy.” He rested his sweaty head back against the tree trunk.

She didn't understand silver's effect on a werewolf, not on the same, intimate level as his kind, nor the danger of being trapped in a single form. More importantly, she didn't realize she'd stabbed him in the gut, where the pain was excruciating and he couldn't rip it out and expect to be fine in five minutes.

Then again, he thought, preparing to remove the blade, Marcy was an artist. She had an excellent understanding of human anatomy (and had been working her way to an excellent grasp of his anatomy, a few moments prior). She might could well have known where to catch him to stall him, not that he would have pursued her.

She knew he'd never kill her. She had to have known, had to have *felt* in her bones as he had when they'd nearly kissed on the table at her house, that their connection was not one of death, but rather, life and the promise of all it contained.

Had Calico gotten to her? Had she convinced Marcy that a reaper was...

Light bounced through the woods—flashlight. August.

It struck him then what she'd attempted to do. He shut his eyes and smiled, gripping the knife's slick handle. It was sweet, in a painful way. And

she had chosen to run, so if he survived, there was an outside chance he could find her trail and save her before the abomination that was Zakar could destroy her.

August's footsteps drew nearer.

Caelan jerked the blade out. Relief, blood, and pain escaped together in a gasp. Using the tree for support, applying pressure to the open wound, he pulled himself to his feet. He'd held his posture straight about ten seconds before doubling over in pain. Dark, thick blood pattered to the forest floor. He coughed, felt faint, and slid back into the blood, this time with his shoulder against the trunk, hiding his right hand.

A pale glow surrounded him. Wiping blood from his mouth, he squinted into the light.

August's eyes flashed gold against the black forest. "Stop on there, brother." The bright beam angled toward the ground. "No need to strain yourself."

"She shot me silvered," Caelan grunted. Wincing, one hand applying pressure to his abdomen, he shifted his position to face his older brother directly. The hand against the trunk located first the edge, then the handle of the knife. With the blade concealed, he gathered his senses to delay the shift and huffed a short, cheery, "You're early."

"What the fuck were you thinking arming her?" August looked from the spiraled limbs of the locust tree to the younger sheriff. "What the hell is this place? Why'd you cross state lines?"

Caelan spit blood. His toes were breaking on the inside of his boots, struggling to force out the wolf. "She asked real nice."

August had a good laugh, dropped the flashlight and brought his hand to his shaking head. "Sheep don't choose their slaughterhouse." He crouched beside the fallen sheriff. "I thought you were a bloodthirsty young gun at the Moonrise Hunt. Nine reapers in one night; I tell ya, that was something else. To have the Otherworld, even Belzer, scared shitless? When talk of elimination came up, I was the vote that kept you alive. I said your efforts were better placed taking out the trash. And you proved me right, bro, until this bitch—"

In a quick motion Caelan dug the knife into August's shoulder.

August screamed. Caelan shoved him, took the gun from its holster around August's waist and staggered onto his feet. While his brother writhed, Caelan's wolf burst through, tearing anew the healing wound.

Transforming injured was never recommended; injuries that were knitting together in one form often took a hot second to reconfigure into new anatomy. His chest burned as all four paws hit the ground. His lungs filled with air, never enough. He panted, fur bristling along his spine, blood dripping from his stomach.

“You're either with us or against us.” August backed into the locust as his brother took one snarling step after another. “That woman is possessed. Whatever you thought you saw in her is dead. She ain't in there. She's a weapon! Don't know what kind, don't know how powerful, but I do know she's a bomb.” He wrenched the knife free, clutching at skin fast melting from his body, revealing the dark wolf underneath. “She's blown up our world; what's next?”

Caelan didn't wait for a fair fight. His jaws clenched around his brother's leg, and he thrashed him good and hard, trapping the man in a mutated half-stage, somewhere painful between wolf and human. When a sharp whine broke into the air, Caelan released the malformed creature and licked his lips.

August watched him through swollen eyes.

Caelan pressed a paw heavy on the man's twisted chest, rested his dark snout against his brother's sticky forehead and whined with him. He understood August's pain. He understood August's loyalty. Loyalty to his brother. Loyalty to the Otherworld. To werewolves. He made a terrible human, but he'd never been a terrible werewolf.

Caelan stared into the half-formed face a moment longer, then turned and padded toward the sound of the river.

“You'll kill us all!” August shouted.

Head cocked, the wolf waited a few seconds and resumed its trot.

“You sent your bitch to undying torment.”

The wolf returned, amber gold eyes fixed on the man. One ear rotated in the direction of the trail head.

“He's gonna torture her,” August continued, pulling his features back into human form. “Beyond anything your tame little mind can imagine.”

The wolf drew closer, ears perked, mouth drawn into a thin line, listening, considerate.

“She suffered nightmares when the demon visited her, right? Those will be daydreams compared to what he does in the flesh.”

August smiled and brushed his fingertips against the wolf's wrist.

“You can't kill her, no big deal. I get you. She's your Winnie. I'll do it. Strangle, shot, fast-acting poison, your choice. We're brothers. We've got each other's backs, right?”

Better the devil you know, Caelan thought, snapping his jaws around his brother's hand. Moments later, fingers twitched against his teeth as he crossed the cold river. His brother's profanities faded in the wind.

On the far bank, the former sheriff shook his black fur dry and disappeared into the night.

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